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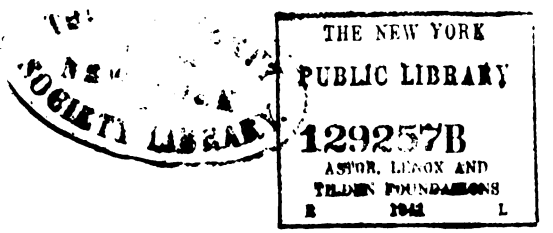

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NATURE'S COMEDIAN

CHAPTER I

HAROLD DUNVILLE AT HOME

"As certain men are called Nature's gentlemen, so Mr. Harold Dunville may be said to be one of Nature's comedians. His very clever and convincing impersonations always strike us as being the result rather of a rare personal gift than of study or schooling; it is as yet impossible to pronounce him a great actor, and equally impossible, of course, to deny that he has become a most successful one. The suggestion may be hazarded that his success is precisely due to the fact that, despite his admirable enunciation and perfect management of hands and features, he is so little of an actor, so visibly unprofessional. It is also possible—in view of the parts to which he has invariably, and no doubt wisely, limited himself—that he has benefited through being, not one of 'Nature's gentlemen,' but by birth and education a gentleman in the more restricted sense of that term."

"Now, I call that beastly impertinent, you know," said Mr. Harold Dunville, tossing the paper across the

table to the lean, clean-shaven, shrewd-looking man who was sharing his breakfast.

"Well," returned the latter, after glancing through the critical notice of which the above formed the opening paragraph, "I don't see much to complain of in this. It's easy to guess who wrote it, and he evidently means to be complimentary. Only he had to justify his reputation by accounting for you somehow or other, and——"

"And he does it by announcing that I am a gentleman —which is none of his business—and insinuating that I am an amateur."

"Oh, that won't hurt you; that won't diminish our receipts, you may depend upon it."

"Perhaps not; but it's a piece of impertinence, all the same."

"You have no particular reason to say so. I can tell you who *will* think they have reason to say so, and that is all the other actors in London, whom he has incidentally informed that they are not gentlemen. I am sorry for him, poor man, but he has brought it upon himself. He shouldn't have tried to account for you in that way. It would have been so easy to explain your triumphs in ways which would have been less offensive to others, though they might have been equally so to you."

Harold Dunville laughed. "Oh, I know what you mean," said he; "you allude to my good looks, of which I am perfectly conscious and not in the least vain. They are a part of my stock in trade; I exhibit them every night upon the stage, and by doing so I give critics the right to comment upon them. If anybody likes to assert that crowds have been attracted to the St. Martin's Thea-

ter for the last three months by my handsome face, he may; I differ from him, but he is entitled to his opinion. My parentage is another matter. I haven't paraded that, and I can't admit that it concerns either the critics or the public."

He was oddly sensitive upon that point. Oddly, at least, to those who were unacquainted with a history which he desired to ignore, and which had left him upon somewhat cold terms with his relatives. It was not, after all, such a very discreditable history, and the follies of youth, which had entailed the loss of his entire patrimony, might have been condoned, had not his widowed mother's straitened circumstances forbidden her to rescue him from the Bankruptcy Court. But bankruptcy, of course, meant compulsory retirement from the army, and when (in the absolute necessity of earning bread and butter by some means or other) he adopted the stage as a profession, the Dunvilles, one and all, declined to have anything further to do with him. Now that, after a good many years of hand-to-mouth existence, he found himself on a sudden famous and prosperous, he not unnaturally resented the assertion that he was indebted to anything save his own talents. For he was vain of his talents if, as he quite truly alleged, he did not pride himself much upon his comeliness.

"And you know, Shepherd," he went on presently, "I don't propose to limit myself forever to the drawing-room parts which, according to this fellow, exhaust my capabilities."

"Yes, I know," drily replied Mr. Shepherd, who was Harold Dunville's secretary, agent, and manager, and

who may, indeed, be said to have discovered, as well as established, that public favorite.

"You say that as if you meant to go on being obstinate," Dunville remarked, rather fretfully.

The other shrugged his shoulders, laughing a little. "Oh, yes; I am afraid I must go on being obstinate. No Shakespeare at the St. Martin's, please, if that is what you have got in your head."

"But why not? If other people produce him, and do so successfully, why shouldn't I?"

"Well, they are not always successful; they tumble down pretty badly, some of them. But they can afford to fail occasionally, whereas you can't as yet. Not in any sense. What we have to do is to stick to what we know will pay. One of these fine days, when you are rich enough and sure enough of your position to try experiments, you may, if you choose, attempt parts for which you don't possess the requisite qualifications."

"What do you call the requisite qualifications? And how can you tell whether I possess them or not?"

Shepherd, seeing the fire of rising anger in his interrogator's large brown eyes, hastened to apologize.

"Well, well! I beg your pardon. Of course I can't tell for certain that you don't possess qualifications which are rather uncommon; you might, for anything I know, give us an entirely new and original rendering of Hamlet or Macbeth. Indeed, I should quite think that you would. Only, if you will believe me, the time for that sort of thing hasn't come yet. The present piece, I take it, is good for another three months' run, and had better be resumed in the autumn. There won't be any

difficulty about renewing our lease of the St. Martin's until Christmas; for Moore, who is doing very well in America, is in no hurry to return. After Christmas I don't know; possibly you may by that time be in a position to start a theater of your own."

Harold Dunville's eyes sparkled and his good humor returned; for it was his ambition to own a theater (only within the last twelve-month had he arrived at the dignity of being a lessee), and he had an unbounded confidence in Shepherd, which was not misplaced.

"How do we stand?" he asked, putting a question which anybody else would have put before.

"Very well, indeed, according to my notions," answered Shepherd, complacently. "Of course, now that the season is drawing toward an end and the weather has become so hot, we must expect diminished receipts; but, making allowance for that, I think that when we close, a few weeks hence, and have paid all expenses, there should be a matter of £8,000 for you in the bank."

"My word!—eight thousand! Shepherd, you're as good as a gold-mine, and I feel like a millionaire!"

"I most sincerely hope that you won't be so insane as to feel or behave like that. I hope you will have the common sense to invest two-thirds of this money in first-class securities at once and to remember that you have embarked upon the most precarious of all trades. It is not in the least difficult, I assure you, to lose as much as you have made. The present piece has gone well; but the next production may fall flat. Nobody ever knows."

"My dear Shepherd, I am persuaded that nothing in which you are concerned will fall flat."

"Thank you; but it is indispensable, all the same, that you should make some provision for a rainy day. Here you are in a flat in Ashley Gardens, and you keep three servants. That doesn't sound wildly extravagant, I grant you; yet when the incidental expenses of entertainments, trips to Brighton, and so forth are counted in, it implies a certain yearly outlay. Do you know at all at what rate per annum you are living?"

"Haven't the most distant idea."

"I thought not; but *I* have an idea. I should say that, what with one thing and another, you are spending from £1,500 to £2,000 a year. Now, do you know what amount of capital is required to produce £1,500 a year in these days of low interest?"

"Indeed I don't, and what's more I don't care. I am not at all likely to starve now, and I really don't aspire to living upon my invested savings, like a retired tradesman."

"You will have to retire eventually," Shepherd began; but his homily was cut short by the entrance of Dunville's servant, who announced, in the indiscreetly discreet undertone which servants are apt to employ on such occasions, that Miss Fitzwalter was at the door, begging for a short interview.

Harold shot a deprecating glance across the table at his companion, whose brows were slightly raised. "Something about the play, I suppose," he remarked; and then, turning to the servant, "Ask her to come in."

As soon as the man had left the room he added hurriedly, "See me through, like a good chap. She is sure to give you a hint to go; but don't take it."

"Oh, I won't take it," answered Shepherd, with a quiet smile.

Presently there sailed in a very tall, somewhat angular lady, whose fine eyes, abundant dark hair, and fairly regular features had won for her the fame of being one of the handsomest actresses on the London stage. On the stage she was unquestionably handsome; off it, and in the strong light of a summer morning, she was obviously on the wrong side of thirty, and even some distance on that wrong side. This was Miss Lorna Fitzwalter (her real name was Laura Walters, but that is neither here nor there), and she ranked second only to Mr. Harold Dunville himself in a company which was, by universal admission, an exceptionally strong one.

"Oh, I didn't know you were here, Mr. Shepherd," said she, in a tone which suggested that the surprise was not an agreeable one.

"I can only hope, Miss Fitzwalter," answered that gentleman, politely, "that my being here may prove of service to you. You have come, of course, about some matter connected with your part."

"Yes; there really must be an alteration in the supper scene. I can't drink three glasses of champagne straight off. For one thing, it disagrees with me; and for another, it shocks the audience. I have seen quite plainly for some time past that it shocked the audience."

Shepherd nodded gravely. "That shall be changed," he promised. "It isn't in any way essential to the action for you to drink more than one glass. I will see to it before this evening's performance."

He did not add any expression of regret that Miss

Fitzwalter should during three whole months have uncomplainingly done violence to her health and her sense of decorum; for he made it a rule to keep upon the best of terms with the rather umbrageous artists whom it was his function to drive or coax.

She looked impatiently at him. "Will you see to it at once?" she asked.

"Without loss of time," replied Shepherd, and showed no inclination to rise.

Miss Fitzwalter sat down abruptly, turning her shoulder toward him, and began to talk to Harold Dunville in a nervous, jerky style. It was evident that she was talking for the sake of talking, and did not know very well what she was talking about. It might also be surmised that she had something to say which could not be said in the presence of a third person. But by degrees she grew calm; the lines upon her forehead and about the corners of her mouth disappeared; once or twice she smiled with the happy air of one whose anxieties have been at least partially relieved.

It was in achievements of this kind that Harold Dunville excelled, and Shepherd, keenly watching him, said to himself that it was not only as good as a play, but far better than most plays. It was not surprising that any woman should be fascinated by the young fellow (for he was still young, and at times looked almost boyish), with his short curly hair, his perfectly shaped nose and mouth, and those wonderful brown eyes of his, which were as expressive as a dog's. "But it's his voice that does the trick," Shepherd mused. He had several voices, all of them pleasant to the ear; but there

was one which, as Shepherd had had previous occasion to notice, he reserved for purposes of intercourse with the opposite sex. Women were never able to resist those caressing accents, which said so much more than the mere articulate words of which they were the vehicle. Miss Fitzwalter could not resist them, and if she gathered that Harold was as much annoyed as she was by the company of his factotum, but that there was no help for it, nor anything to be done but to await a more favorable opportunity, that was exactly what she was meant to gather. She rose at length, holding out her hand and saying:

"We shall meet this evening at the theater—and afterward?"

"I quite hope so," answered her host. Then, observing that her smile faded, while her eyebrows drew together, he added quickly: "Oh, yes, I'll make a point of it—I'll make a point of it!"

"I don't wish to be inquisitive or impertinent," said Shepherd, after Harold had returned from showing the visitor out, "but may I ask whether Miss Fitzwalter is in the habit of calling upon you at your private residence?"

"Well, I begged you to sit her out, didn't I?" returned Harold, laughing. "Yes, she has been here once or twice. Suggestions or complaints about the piece, you know."

"Such as her inability to drink more than one glass of champagne without feeling ill, eh? It is only upon the stage that she suffers in that way, I imagine."

"Oh, come, Shepherd!"

"I make no insinuations; I mean nothing more than what I say. Only, with your permission, Dunville, I should like to say quite plainly what I mean; which is that you will get yourself into a horrid mess one of these days if you are not more careful. Miss Fitzwalter is a decentish sort of woman, but she is excitable, she is even more foolish than the women of her class generally are, she is by no means in her first youth, and—she is obviously liable to be hypnotized by you. I should have thought that it would be simple enough to refrain from hypnotizing her."

The thing was not quite so simple as that. On the contrary, it was just upon the process which Shepherd described as hypnotism that Harold relied to preserve him from worse dangers. But, as this could not be explained, he only laughed again and answered:

"My dear man, it's all right. I am not such a fool as you take me for, and there really isn't the least risk of my being sued for breach of promise."

There was, nevertheless, an appreciable risk of his being overtaken by that calamity; for if he had not actually asked Lorna Fitzwalter to marry him, he had gone so near it that she unquestionably regarded him as her property. Her fits of jealousy, mitigated by hypnotism, had been disagreeably frequent of late, and might have embittered his life, had he not been blessed with the happy faculty of dismissing one set of circumstances from his mind the moment that he began to occupy himself with another. He thought about Lorna for some minutes after he had taken leave of Shepherd, had gone out and was walking briskly in the direction of the Park.

He thought about the history of his relations with her, which was not known to his mentor, of her extraordinary kindness to him in the hard days when he had often but a few shillings in his pocket, of her devotion and encouragement and unfaltering belief in his future. She was, of course, rather vulgar, apt to be rather noisily hilarious when she was enjoying herself, and, as Shepherd had said, she was excitable and foolish. He need need not have called her " decentish," though; she was absolutely decent, and had, it was said, always been so. Nobody was more universally respected in the profession. As for himself, he had certainly been very fond of her, and was still fond of her; but had he ever thought of marrying her? He really could not remember; but he was quite sure that he did not want to marry her now.

" If it comes to that," he muttered, " I'll be hanged if I want to marry anybody! I should loathe being married. Good Lord! think of the perpetual trouble that there would be with the others! "

The others were extraordinarily numerous; he often, and quite honestly, wished that they were less so, though he hardly saw how he was to reduce their numbers. They wrote to him in the warmest terms, many of them without waiting for the formality of introduction; they waylaid him in public and in private; they were of all ages and classes. He had ceased to be flattered by such tributes to physical charms of which, as he had truly assured Shepherd, he was not vain, and his female admirers, upon the whole, bored him a good deal; yet he could not help treating them as though he loved them. It was a method which had its disadvantages; but it was

at least preferable to that of quarreling with them, he thought. He had, for instance, to lunch that day in Park Lane with a certain great lady who had taken him up violently and who might have done him some injury in his profession had he offended her by declining her constant invitations. She was a silly woman, sprightly and flighty in a style which accorded ill with her years, and her luncheon parties were far too large and too long to be enjoyable; but her importance and influence were not to be ignored. So he went, and if he was wishing himself anywhere else all the time, nobody would have guessed it from his manner. The smart ladies whom he met were enchanted with him; even the gilded youths whom he outshone had to admit that he was not a bad sort; the only offense that he gave was by pleading urgent business at the theater as an excuse for departing before the other guests had left, which was perhaps not what his hostess had meant him to do.

He really had one or two matters to attend to at the theater, and he betook himself thither forthwith in a hansom, drawing long breaths of relief while he was being borne smoothly through the sunny streets. For the theater, at any rate, interested him, and smart society, as such, did not. On reaching his destination, he found, as was usually the case, a little pile of letters and telegrams awaiting him, and these he quickly examined. Not one of them arrested his attention for more than a moment until he came to the last of the telegrams, which brought him unexpected and even rather startling intelligence.

"Our dear mother died suddenly this morning. Pray come to us at once, if possible. Dick."

HAROLD DUNVILLE AT HOME

Harold Dunville stood for some minutes, holding the slip of paper in one hand, while with the other he pensively pinched his chin.

Then he sighed heavily and made his way up dark and tortuous stairs to the little room which was appropriated to his secretary's use. Shepherd looked up from a mass of correspondence, as he entered, and, taking note of his grave face, asked:

"Anything wrong?"

"I have had rather a knock," Harold answered, quietly; "I have just heard that my mother is dead."

Shepherd stared. He did not know very much about his friend's domestic affairs; but he did happen to know that Mrs. Dunville had treated him with the utmost severity—had, in fact, refused to hold any intercourse, direct or indirect, with him, and had not even troubled herself to ascertain whether he was in want or not. That she had at one time had reasons for thinking ill of her son was likely enough; but she had, nevertheless, in Shepherd's opinion, shown herself a most unnatural mother, and it was difficult to imagine that her decease could be a source of any profound grief to one whom she had so pitilessly disowned. Yet the man was genuinely grieved; nobody could look at his face and doubt that. Shepherd, who knew very well—or thought he knew—what were the weaknesses of the friend who was at once his employer and his *protégé,* knew also—or thought he knew—that Harold had a good heart, and this theory of his now received touching confirmation.

"My dear fellow," said he, kindly, "I am very sorry. Of course you won't play to-night."

"Oh, I can't; I must go down to my brother, who has telegraphed for me. My mother has lived with him of late years, and she died in his house."

"I see. Well, don't worry about the piece; Sanford is very well up in your part, and audiences are always sympathizing in cases of bereavement. You won't wish to appear again for some little time, I suppose?"

"Not for another ten days or a fortnight, I should think. To tell you the truth, the period of my absence will depend a little upon how I am received by my brother and my sister; but I imagine that, whether they wish me to stay with them or not, they would hardly consider it decent for me to resume my public appearances at once. Personally, I have no feeling of that kind about it; one's private sorrows have so little to do with the antics by which one makes a living."

He spoke somewhat bitterly and looked somewhat forlorn. It was easy to guess that this very popular and prosperous fellow had moments of despondency, moments of yearning for that family affection which nothing can replace. Shepherd, who was not, as a rule, demonstrative, got up and patted him on the shoulder.

"Your brother and your sister will be very glad to see you and to keep you with them," said he; "they would be a couple of brutes if they weren't. Now you had better go and pack; I must see about getting notices printed for this evening's play-bills."

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

DUNVILLE MANOR stands on a hillside, with its back against the Weald of Kent, looking down superbly upon a wide expanse of arable land, orchards, and hop-gardens, nearly all of which were, less than a hundred years ago, the property of the good old family whence it derives its name. But certain successive members of that family having been quite the reverse of good in an economical sense, the ancestral acres shrank by degrees until nothing of them remained but a park and a small home farm—a state of things which rendered it somewhat difficult for the Reverend Richard Dunville, when he succeeded, to find a tenant for so large a house. However, he had the good luck, after a time, to secure one in the person of Sir Joseph Gardiner, a retired ironmaster, who did not, fortunately, insist upon shooting and who was fascinated—or perhaps the ladies of his household were—by the beautiful Jacobean building, with its spacious reception-rooms, its broad terraces, and its charming walled garden.

As for the Reverend Richard, who could by no means afford to be a squarson, he continued to live, as he had done for some years previous to his father's death, in the neighboring rectory, his mother and his sister joining

him and adding their small means to his. Until the manor was let they were very poor indeed, for the last of the Dunville squires had crippled himself by extravagance in his youth, and he left behind him liabilities which Richard insisted absolutely upon discharging. Moreover, at that very untimely juncture came Harold's fiasco, which had to be dealt with. This, as has already been mentioned, could not be adequately dealt with, and bankruptcy ensued; yet sundry claims, not capable of being enforced by legal process, were honorably met; for a long time after which the rector of the parish drank no wine and kept no horses; though he was fond of riding and liked a glass of port after dinner in the winter very much. But these hard times came to an end for him when he got the white elephant of his inheritance off his hands, and although he was even then rather badly off, he was able once more to allow himself the luxury of a saddle-horse. Nobody who knew Mrs. Dunville expected him to indulge in the luxury of matrimony; nobody would have had the courage to attempt living in the house with that terrible old woman, nor, indeed, would Richard himself have dreamed of suggesting such a thing.

At the time of his mother's sudden death, which was a genuine shock and grief to him, he was in his thirty-eighth year, a stalwart, broad-shouldered man, with a large, pleasant, sun-burned face, clear blue eyes and dark hair, which was already beginning to turn gray at the temples. He was very popular in the parish, as indeed he deserved to be, for he had always done what parochial work there was to do with a will, he was an en-

thusiastic cricketer, and, as far as his means and profession allowed him to be so, an ardent sportsman. He could not boast of his younger brother's good looks; but he had the sort of comeliness which belongs to excellent health combined with amiability, and, as his sister Anne, herself a very homely person, sometimes remarked, one undeniably first-class beauty is enough in any family. She was sitting with him in his little darkened study at the rectory shortly after he had despatched the telegram alluded to in the last chapter, and she was talking about its recipient, whom she had not seen for a good many years.

"I should think he would come," she remarked, musingly.

"Oh, he is quite certain to come!"

"Well, yes, I suppose he is. It will be odd to have him in these parts again."

"It will be a great joy to me," the rector declared, with a hint of reproach in his voice. "What grieves me is that our dear mother and he can never be reconciled now in this world."

"They never would have been if she had lived to be a hundred. Her view, you know, was that he had brought eternal disgrace upon himself and upon us all by becoming a professional actor. It isn't very easy to pardon people who have eternally disgraced themselves and their relations."

"But her view—if I may say so without disrespect—was a totally mistaken one. I can't help blaming myself for having failed to convince her that it was mistaken."

Anne smiled. She had a queer, dry smile, the effect of which was to lower the corners of her mouth, instead of elevating them. Anne was forty years of age and looked more. Dark in coloring, like all the Dunvilles, she had a swarthier complexion than either of her brothers; she had always been plain, and for years past had not made the slightest effort to render herself less so.

"You did try, didn't you, Dick?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," answered the rector, with a sigh, "I did try—once."

Then he caught his sister's eye and they both laughed a little. It was in truth not very likely that anybody would have attempted a second time to convince the late Mrs. Dunville of error. But Dick, remembering how inappropriate laughter was at such a time, made haste to compose his countenance.

"You—you'll be good to him, won't you, Anne?" he resumed presently in hesitating, persuasive accents.

"Bless your life, yes!" returned Anne, briskly; "did you think I was going to take this opportunity of insulting him! *I* haven't any prejudice against actors; I haven't even any particular prejudice against Harold, who was always a plausible sort of fellow, and who may be a reformed character. There was room for reform; let us hope that it has taken place. But you know more about him in these days than I do."

Dick shook his head. "I don't know much about him. I looked him up in London on one occasion, and he welcomed me very kindly; but I didn't repeat the visit, because I felt that it would be hardly loyal to

mother. Then, a month or two ago, I went to the St. Martin's Theater and saw him in this new piece which has made such a sensation." The rector paused for a moment and then spread out his hands, his face lighting up with enthusiasm. "Simply superb!" he ejaculated —"simply superb!"

"The play, do you mean?

"No; the play was only pretty good; I mean Harold. In all my life I have never seen anything so perfectly easy and apparently unstudied, yet so perfectly right. There wasn't a gesture or a tone amiss from start to finish; he seemed to have absolutely converted himself into the man whom he represented."

Anne nodded. "Ah," she observed, slowly and meditatively, "I shouldn't wonder."

"Anne, you *are* prejudiced against him!"

"I can't think why you should say so."

"Because of your manner. I suspect you of keeping something back."

"Is it my habit to keep things back? Do I, for instance, go up to London upon the plea of having to attend an S. P. G. meeting and then lark off to the play surreptitiously?"

"Oh, well, I couldn't tell dear mother about that, you know."

"No, I agree that you couldn't. You might have told me, though."

"At the time I thought that it would perhaps be rather more prudent not to mention it even to you, Anne," the rector frankly owned; "but to return to what we were speaking of——"

"I must leave you now, Dick," interrupted Miss Dunville, who was not anxious to revert to that topic; "I ought to be seeing to various things, the making ready of Harold's room among others. I presume he will come down by the 7.30?"

"I should think he would. Anyhow, I'll be at the station with the pony-trap upon the chance."

Harold did arrive by the 7.30, and the meeting between the two brothers was an affectionate one. What particularly touched the elder was his junior's simple, unaffected sorrow over their common loss; for, indeed, Harold might well have been pardoned had he adopted a less filial tone.

"Of course," said Dick, while they were driving away together, "I can't help regretting that it is now too late for old differences to be made up, and I can't help wishing that I had done a little more than I did to bring about a reconciliation. But—you know what our dear mother was."

"Quite well," answered Harold, with a slight smile, "and I know that she had every right to treat me as incorrigible. One must accept the consequences of having behaved like a supreme ass and spent more money than one possessed."

"I don't think it was so much that as her antiquated horror of the stage. She maintained that no actor could be a gentleman, nor any gentleman an actor. Then, too, I think that our reduced circumstances tended to narrow and embitter her; she never quite forgave me for letting the manor, though she knew how impossible it was for me to live there."

"Well," observed Harold, tolerantly, "all that is over and done with. We must try to forget recent years, and only remember that she was a good mother to us when we were boys. This seems to have been very sudden. Had she been ailing for long?"

"Not for an hour that we knew of. She went to bed apparently in her usual health, and this morning she was found dead in her chair. The doctor, it seems, was aware that her heart was weak, but he did not suspect the existence of any organic disease. He thinks that her death was probably painless."

Harold nodded and sighed. "'To cease upon the midnight with no pain,'" he murmured; "what better fortune can be desired for ourselves or for others? One doesn't particularly fear death; but one is a little bit afraid of the slow, gruesome process of dying."

Dick opened his lips as if to demur to these sentiments; for he held orthodox opinions and prayed quite sincerely on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, to be preserved from battle, murder, and sudden death; but, remembering that his brother's opinions were in all probability the reverse of orthodox, he held his peace. It rejoiced and comforted his honest heart to think that, be his brother's religious opinions what they might, nobody could have behaved in the circumstances with more perfect good taste and good feeling.

Harold did not say much when they arrived at the rectory, and when he was conducted into the bedroom where Mrs. Dunville's body lay; he did not say much after he had taken his last look at those stern features, serene in death, which he had not seen for many years;

but he was visibly moved, visibly—perhaps needlessly—remorseful.

"My dear fellow," Dick said, laying his hand on the other's shoulder as they went down-stairs together, "you must not reproach yourself for an estrangement which, I feel sure, would have come to an end long ago if—if it had been practicable to represent matters in their true light. Very few people nowadays, I should think, would deny that your profession is an honorable one, and it is certain that nobody could refuse you credit for having made your living in your own way. Personally, if you'll allow me to say so, I feel extremely proud of you."

Anne was not so flattering. Anne, whom he met just before the dinner hour, and whose grizzled hair gave him a startling reminder of the passage of time, surveyed him with her head slightly inclined to one side, which was an old habit of hers, and when he had gently said what was fitting and kindly, observed in her abrupt, dry way:

"You haven't changed, Harold."

Being unable to return the compliment, he kept silence, and the meal which followed was inevitably a silent one. The old woman who lay dead up-stairs had been hard, autocratic, opinionated; yet she had possessed qualities, such as a love of truth and justice, which are not very common with her sex and which had endeared her to her daughter, while her elder son, though a good deal afraid of her, had always held her in the highest esteem. The sight of her empty chair (for

Anne would not seat herself at the head of the table) was saddening to them both, and Harold, taking his cue from them, spoke only at intervals, in a subdued tone of voice. Later in the evening, however—possibly in response to appealing glances from Dick—Anne made advances which were instantly and cordially met. She asked a few questions about the St. Martin's Theater; she displayed a little of the interest which relationship demanded of her that she should feel in the lessee of that prosperous playhouse; she even went so far as to say that she would rather like to see him in his professional capacity.

"My dear sister," returned Harold, "it is as easy to do that as to take a return-ticket to London, and I have a spare bedroom which is entirely at your service. You won't witness a very high-class or improving spectacle; but, on the other hand, you won't be bored, for the piece we are doing just now has never bored anybody. I make that statement upon the authority of the press."

"I have no doubt I should be immensely amused," said Anne; "but I can't accept your hospitality at present, thanks. We are old-fashioned people in these parts, as you may remember, and it wouldn't do for me to be seen at a theater this year. I must rest satisfied with admiring your talents off the stage."

She added presently, after noting Harold's look of pained surprise and interrogation: "You will have opportunities of trotting them out, those talents of yours; for the neighborhood, I am afraid, doesn't think too well

of you. Oh, we're an old-fashioned lot, all of us, except the Gardiners. And the Gardiners are away from home."

"I don't know that I am consumed with anxiety to propitiate the neighborhood," said Harold, smiling.

"No? Well, I fancy that it might take you all your time to do it, if you were. Still, I don't say that you would fail."

"I shall be quite contented if I can propitiate my own people," Harold declared.

"Meaning me? I am sure you don't mean Dick, who is already on all-fours at your feet. But I need no propitiating: I have always recognized in you the most gifted member of the family. By the way, I hope you don't expect to inherit any part of my mother's small fortune. To avoid disappointment, I may as well tell you at once what I know for a fact, that you won't get a penny."

Harold answered, quite truthfully, that he had had no expectations. Then he got up, walked across to the sofa upon which his sister was sitting, and gave her a little tap on the shoulder.

"Look here, Anne," said he, good humoredly, "this isn't quite fair. Of course I made a fool of myself once upon a time, and cost you all, I am afraid, money which you could ill afford to spare; but I think you will admit that I was punished, and perhaps you will also admit that, although I was extravagant, I was never greedy or avaricious. You hint—what is it that you hint? Upon my honor, I don't know; but I can tell you, likewise upon

my honor, that I have no wish, nor any design, except to be friends with you both."

It was impossible to hold out against an assurance so frankly straightforward. Anne smiled (and this time the corners of her mouth did not turn down), while she extended her hand to her younger brother. "I apologize," said she; "I had no business to hint—indeed, I am not much given to hinting—but you must remember that I am a sour old maid, whereas you are a brilliant and attractive young celebrity. Naturally, I wanted to see how you would stand having nasty things said to you. You stand it very well, and we will certainly make friends, please."

They did not exactly make friends; her attitude was rather too critical and observant for that, while his was perhaps a trifle overconciliatory; but at least there were no verbal encounters between them during the next few days, and Dick had the comfort of believing, as well as hoping, that his mother's death had finally closed a breach which he had always deplored.

The very large attendance at the funeral bore testimony to the respect which had been entertained throughout the county for the deceased lady. Most of those who followed her remains to the grave had a kind word to say to the rector after he had read the last sentences of the burial service; and one or two even went so far as to shake hands with his younger brother, although the general feeling was that Harold had brought no credit upon the family. Among the few who thus recalled themselves to the memory of the now famous actor was Mr. Ormond, of Beechwood Hall, a round-faced, ruddy old gentleman,

ultra-Tory in his principles, bigoted, choleric, but warm-hearted, and (as he flattered himself) always ready to give the devil his due.

"This is a sad home-coming for you, my boy," said he; "and the saddest part of it is that you find your old home in strange occupancy. Well, there was no help for it, I suppose."

"None whatever that I can see," answered Harold, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Ah, perhaps not—perhaps not. And you're prospering, I understand."

"Oh, yes, I am prospering, thank you."

"You are, eh? H'm—yours is a queer position for a Dunville and a brother of a parson to be in. Still, as somebody or other says, it takes all sorts of people to make a world, and bygones had better be bygones. For your father's and your mother's sake, not to mention your brother's and your own, we mustn't show you the cold shoulder; so I hope, when you have leisure and inclination, you'll find your way over to Beechwood. Very glad to see you any day."

Harold kept his countenance until he was out of the churchyard, and even then only laughed a little. Old Mr. Ormond's magnanimity and patronage were sufficiently comic; but to one of his temperament there was something very depressing in the discovery that at so short a distance from the metropolis his fame counted for absolutely nothing. In the eyes of these worthy people he was simply a rather disreputable person who had come to grief in early life and had then adopted a

trade which had compelled his nearest relations to break off intercourse with him. Absurd and ignorant as such a view was, it hurt him; for what he valued far more than fame—more, indeed, than anything else in the world—was popularity.

CHAPTER III

MISS DUNVILLE'S EWE LAMB

HAROLD walked away from the churchyard by himself, since nobody seemed to covet particularly the privilege of his company. A certain number of uncles and cousins had, as in duty bound, come down to swell the long train of mourners and had greeted him somewhat chillingly. He did not care to accompany these haughty kinsmen of his back to the rectory, where presumably refreshments awaited them; so he struck off in the direction of the manor, thinking that he would like to see the old place again, and having heard from Anne that its tenants were absent. Indeed, he knew without being told that Sir Joseph Gardiner, who was one of the members for an important manufacturing city in the North, was attending to legislative duties at Westminster.

He strolled through a copse and across the park along a path familiar to him and trodden almost daily, in years gone by, by feet which had once been his; it made him feel rather old and insignificant (although he was in truth one of those people who never grow old and are constitutionally debarred from insignificance) to notice how unchanged everything, except he himself, was. The spot where Dick, always his superior in muscular

strength, had given him such a hiding for having, in a fit of boyish petulance, purposely run himself out at a local cricket-match; the spreading lime-tree beneath which, at a later period, he had composed halting sonnets to a neighboring beauty whose very name he had forgotten; the broad, level bowling-green, where his father had been wont to pace to and fro by the hour, with a puckered brow and hands under his coat-tails—all, on that still, sultry summer afternoon, looked so exactly, so calmly and indifferently the same that a mere ephemeral mortal could not but experience some sense of resentment mingled with his mild regret. The turf, to be sure, was better kept than of yore, and the formal flower-beds which faced the house had a somewhat trimmer aspect; no doubt more men were now employed about the place than under the old impecunious *régime*. Two of them looked up from the weeding upon which they were engaged and touched their caps to him as he approached, repeating the salute immediately afterward in honor of a young lady who emerged from the walled garden whither Harold was bound. This young lady, dressed all in white and carrying a basket of flowers, was quite distinctly pretty. She was very small, she had a neat little figure, gray-blue eyes, fair hair, and a dimple on her left cheek when she smiled. It was not at Harold that she smiled; but the privilege of beholding the dimple was his all the same, and perhaps the circumstance of her possessing that dimple, in addition to being distinctly pretty, was answerable, rather than the probability that she was Sir Joseph Gardiner's daughter, for his instant decision to accost her.

"I ought," said he, taking off his hat, "to apologize for trespassing."

"But not to me," answered the girl—and this time he was able to flatter himself that her smile was addressed to him alone—"because I am a trespasser myself. It is true," she added, glancing down at her basket, "that I am authorized. Lady Gardiner allows me to make occasional raids upon her conservatories when she is in London."

"Ah, I'm not authorized," Harold remarked.

"But of course you would be if the Gardiners knew that you were here. Nobody has a better right to trespass on these grounds, I am sure."

"Oh, you know who I am, then?"

"Yes, I recognized you the moment that I saw you. I must confess, though, that I was prepared, for I had heard that you were expected. I suppose I have no right to be affronted at your not recognizing me; but I shall be a little bit hurt if you can't recall Lil Ormond when you are reminded of her. A small child who generally had something unbecoming the matter with her, and whom you used to befriend long ago."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Harold, "is it possible? Of course I remember Lil. I don't remember the unbecoming maladies."

"I assure you I had them. Chicken-pox and nettle-rash and I don't know what else. My childhood was one prolonged disfigurement; but, unlike my own family, you never made remarks upon the subject, and you were never afraid of infection."

"Well," observed Harold, gazing appreciatively at

her clear skin, "you have got over those troubles now, anyhow."

He had in reality but a very dim recollection of his childish ally, having since the time to which she alluded made so many other allies of her sex and of maturer years; but he was charmed to renew acquaintance with the developed Miss Lilian Ormond, and he gladly acquiesced in her suggestion that she should exhibit to him some alterations to which the walled garden had been subjected. He found her very friendly, very conversational, not in the least shy, yet delightfully and most refreshingly unsophisticated. To be unsophisticated is not necessarily to be without tact or discrimination, and he thought that Miss Ormond displayed both of these qualities by abstaining from any allusion to his bereavement. As a matter of fact, she did not allude to it because in her opinion the late Mrs. Dunville had treated her second son atrociously and because she herself had always disliked the old woman. But what won Harold's heart was her genuine and avowed admiration of his histrionic genius. She had seen him act more than once, it appeared, and she called him a genius in so many words, which was delightful of her. He loved applause; it was meat and drink to him; he had been even more disconcerted than he realized by the unintended snub which he had received from this young lady's father, and he could have thrown himself at her feet when she said:

"You must be very happy. You have climbed to the top of the tree, and it is only one man in a thousand, I suppose, who manages to do that."

However, he modestly replied: "My tree is not a lofty one, nor, such as it is, can I claim to have reached its topmost branches. I am glad that you think me worthy of a pat on the back, though. Mr. Ormond doesn't. I saw him just now, and he gave me to understand that, although he couldn't approve of my calling, he was ready, in consideration of my birth, to shake hands with me in public."

"Did he? But he never enters a theater and doesn't know. We are rather benighted down here, I am afraid; but I can tell you of one person, at all events, by whom you are appreciated, and that is your brother. We have often talked about you."

"What?—you and Dick? Are you a friend of Dick's, then?"

"A very great friend," she said. Mr. Dunville had prepared her for confirmation and had also taught her to take an intelligent interest in fox-hunting, which pastime, she remarked, "does not consist, as so many people think it does, in galloping after the hounds." She had a great deal to say in praise of her rector, and Harold listened to her patiently, notwithstanding the intrinsically dull nature of the subject. He found it pleasant to listen to her by reason of her soft, musical voice and because the longer he looked at her, the more he found himself fascinated by that dimple of hers. Naturally, he would have preferred to go on talking about himself; but he was too clever, or else his intuitions were too accurate, for egotism, and it was she who reverted eventually of her own accord to that more enthralling topic. Then by her encouragement he became

confidential, owning to ambitions which, through sordid considerations, he had as yet been unable to gratify, and dwelling at some length upon the possibilities and the limitations of the actor's art. When at length the necessity of taking his leave was forced upon him by a clangorous reminder from the clock-tower overhead, he had the satisfaction of feeling sure that he had produced an agreeable impression upon Miss Ormond. But lest there should be any doubt in his mind as to that, she said, frankly:

"I do hope we shall meet again before you go back to London. Are you going to stay any time at the rectory?"

"Well, a few more days, if my brother will keep me. Mr. Ormond was so kind as to ask me to call upon you; but I am not quite sure that he meant what he said."

"Oh, he means what he says; only we are such a large party at home that visitors, as a rule, have some difficulty in hearing themselves speak. I think I will look up Anne at tea-time one of these days. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling her so from me."

With that they parted, and if Mr. Harold Dunville was under the impression that he had added to the long list of his conquests, he was scarcely to blame. Conquests, indeed, were so integral a part of his daily life that they had ceased to touch his vanity.

During dinner, that evening, he casually alluded to his meeting with Miss Ormond, and remarked that she was "an awfully nice little girl," an expression of opinion in which Dick cordially concurred, while Anne re-

turned, in her dry way: "Much too nice for the likes of you."

"My dear Anne," said Harold, laughing, "are you charging me with matrimonial designs? I assure you I haven't any; my future bride—who, I hope, may belong to the rather remote future—must indispensably be possessed of a snug little fortune in her own right."

"So I should imagine," Anne replied. "No, I don't accuse you of wanting to marry Lil Ormond; but it wouldn't have been you if you hadn't tried to get up a flirtation with her, and I take leave to object to your flirting with her, because she happens to be rather a friend of mine."

"I gathered as much from what she said. I was to tell you, by the way, that she was coming to tea with you some day soon."

"Was that meant as a message to me or an appointment with you, I wonder? Either way, be so good as to realize that it is a case of paws off! You can amuse yourself very well, I suspect, without bringing your fascinations to bear upon my ewe lamb."

"Don't be rude, Anne," remonstrated Dick.

But Miss Dunville only nodded her head, tightened the set of her lips and sniffed. She knew very well what she was talking about, and perhaps she also knew what her younger brother was, although she had not for so long had any opportunity of studying him. The subject was changed, and only after she had left the room did Dick recur to it, in order to apologize for her.

"Anne's manners are abrupt," he observed; "she is apt to say just what comes into her head, and some-

times—though not very often, I am bound to admit—rather foolish things come into her head. This evening she is a little aggressive, and I believe I can tell you why. She won't say, but I am pretty sure she feels, that she has inherited more than she ought to have done under our dear mother's will."

"Oh, does she?" asked Harold, indifferently. "What does she get?"

"Well, everything, except a few legacies to servants. I needn't tell you that everything doesn't mean much, and of course it was quite right that she should be provided for. At the same time, I wish you had not been altogether forgotten."

"Not for one moment did I expect to be remembered. Besides, I am making any amount of money in these days. But, if it comes to that, why should you have been forgotten?"

"Oh, I hadn't the shadow of a claim. I am the head of the family, and my revenues are—well, they are sufficient to enable me to keep my head above water, now that I am blessed with a wealthy tenant. I am very glad to hear that you are doing so well, Harold; I often envy you."

"Would you rather be an actor than a parson?"

"I should certainly like to have succeeded as brilliantly in my profession as you have in yours," answered Dick, with a sigh. "It seems to me that people underrate the power and influence of the stage, which are prodigious—as indeed they ought to be."

"I suppose they might be, if we had any playwrights or any actors. Personally, I get rather weary of repeat-

ing the same stale old tricks and seeing things done in the same old conventional, bad way. However, the public, I am told, insists upon having what it is accustomed to have, and the dollars make some amends. I must go back to the mill presently, or the flow of dollars will begin to run dry."

"But not at once, I hope," said Dick, anxiously; "you will allow us to see a little of you now, won't you? It hasn't been our fault, you know, that we have seen nothing of you for all these years."

"It is very good of you," answered Harold, smiling and laying his hand upon his brother's wrist, "to wish for the company of such a—what shall I call myself?—such a degenerate Dunville. Oh, yes; I'll stay a few more days with you, if you like. After that I shall have to return to town and wind up the season."

"Then you'll come down to us again, eh? Or would you be bored in this dull, provincial neighborhood?"

Not being sure whether he would be bored or not, Harold returned an amiable, evasive reply. He had as yet only so far made up his mind with regard to the disposition of his summer that he desired to spend it in some place unlikely to be patronized by Miss Fitzwalter. But within forty-eight hours circumstances had enabled him to arrive at a decision which he had every reason to hope would prove as agreeable to his brother as it was to himself; for within that comparatively short space of time he found out that Lilian Ormond was for him the dearest and most important of created beings. It was by no means the first time that he had made a similar discovery, nor on any previous occasion had disillusion been

slow to overtake and quench fascination; but it is in the nature of such discoveries that they should cancel experience, and, after a delightful, dawdling walk with Lilian through shady lanes in the cool of the evening he had not the slightest doubt but that he was at last definitely, permanently in love. He was perhaps constitutionally incapable of that emotional condition; if so, he only resembled the majority of his fellow mortals. But he was at least very well able to persuade himself that he entertained the sentiments for which he periodically took credit, and nothing was more certain to arouse them in his breast than the conviction that they were responsive.

"Meeting you has been one of the memorable events of my life," Miss Ormond candidly told him while they were strolling away from the rectory together, after a visit which Anne had ineffectually done what in her lay to render formal. "It isn't often that I have the honor of conversing with a celebrity, and the few whom I have come across up to now have been rather rude to me."

"I have often," Harold remarked, "suspected that many celebrities are idiots, and now I know it. My family, I am sure, would tell you that I am rather an idiot, though I doubt whether they would concede that I am celebrated."

"If you mean Anne, her bark is always worse than her bite; your brother, I know, appreciates you."

"Ah, good old Dick!"

"He really is good, as well as appreciative. I only wish his parochial duties hadn't prevented him from

coming in to tea when Anne was trying to snub you and when you were taking—I really can't help calling it—her impertinence so good-humoredly. But, whatever she may say or think, she can't alter facts."

"And it is a fact, of course, that I have somehow or other contrived to win the applause of London audiences."

"It is a fact that you have won the applause of everybody whose admiration is worth having."

"You realize, I hope," observed Harold, smiling, "that that definition must necessarily include yours."

"Oh, I haven't made much secret of mine, have I? What I regret is that I so seldom get a chance of expressing it. We are too poor, and there are too many of us for London seasons."

"I wish I were not too poor and too busy for country ones," sighed Harold. "However, I shall have a longish holiday this year, I expect."

"Which you won't spend in these parts, I am afraid."

"I will like a shot, if I'm asked. For the matter of that, I actually have been asked by Dick."

"Oh, have you?" cried the girl, in undisguised pleasure; "then for whose invitation are you waiting? For Anne's?"

"I fancy that I might wait some little time for that. No; the rectory, after all, isn't Anne's house, and although I know she doesn't want to put me up, she might, at a pinch, have to put up with me. The question is—could *you* put up with me?"

Miss Ormond colored slightly, but displayed no other

sign of embarrassment. She said only what anybody must have said in reply; yet she said it with such friendliness and obvious sincerity that her companion at once let himself go. He had methods of letting himself go which were less the outcome of prudence and experience than of instinct; it is probable that he was never consciously circumspect, and it is certain that he always managed to imply considerably more than he actually stated. Assertions to the effect that he had many acquaintances and few friends, that he was a lonely man who habitually lived in a crowd, that he knew not whither to turn for real sympathy and so forth, were not very far removed from the truth. Naturally, Lilian Ormond, herself a straightforward person, drew the conclusion which she was meant to draw from his words, his eyes, and his voice; naturally, she was flattered; naturally also, she urged him to return and assured him that he would always receive from one humble quarter the sympathy which had been somewhat markedly denied to him in his own home circle. A long, confidential colloquy ensued, at the end of which they had the satisfaction of believing that they understood one another. They did not understand one another in the least; but what is rather more to the point than that is that they struck up a firm alliance.

In the course of the evening Dick joyfully imparted to his sister the good news that Harold had been prevailed upon to "come home again" on the termination of the theatrical season.

"Oh, he calls this 'home' now, does he?" was Anne's dry comment.

"I should be only too glad if he would consider it so," Dick declared.

"I suppose you would. Perhaps you would also be glad to see him laying siege to Lil Ormond's young affections."

The rector's honest countenance clouded over a little. "Well, no; I shouldn't much like that," he confessed; "but I don't think that anything of the sort is at all likely to happen. Why do you make such suggestions?"

"Only because it is quite sure to happen, and because you would have thought so if you had come in to tea this afternoon, as I asked you to do. Well, now you are warned; though the warning comes rather too late to be of much practical service. However, I count a little upon his levity and a good deal upon her simplicity."

"Her simplicity?" repeated Dick, with a puzzled look. "I don't quite follow you."

"To think that you should have held a cure of souls for so many years without discovering what a bulwark simplicity is! Simple people are far more difficult to humbug than complicated ones."

"I don't know how that may be; but I know that Harold is not a humbug," the loyal Dick declared. "I believe him to be thoroughly sincere."

"So do I—at a given moment and for that moment. Just what is apt to make him dangerous. As I say, I doubt whether he will humbug Lil for long; my impression is that she will end by finding him out. All the same, you would have shown wisdom and spared yourself some anxiety by withholding an uncalled-for invitation. Now,

if you like, you can go and tell Harold that I have been blackening his character."

The rector did not do that; nothing in the world was further from his wishes than to increase any ill feeling that might already exist between two people to whom he was so warmly attached. But he did, in reply to some leading remark of his brother's—possibly in tacit avowal of some personal misgivings—say:

"Lilian Ormond is a good girl and a clever girl; still, I need hardly tell you that she is absolutely without experience of the world. I am sure you won't, when you come back, treat her as though she were a woman of the world."

"I shall endeavor to treat her," Harold answered, laughing, "as being what she is—a young lady who has had the privilege of being prepared for confirmation by you. For what sort of a reprobate do you take me, I wonder?"

He obtained the fraternal assurance of confidence for which he asked and which he honestly deemed that he merited. He had not lived the life of a saint, and his opinion of Miss Ormond's sex in general was what her sex in general had imposed upon him; but he really was not a reprobate, and he was really in love. This being so, it was not in the nature of things that he should quit the neighborhood without seizing such opportunities as were granted to him of intimating as much to the person principally concerned.

Then he went back to London, and, if he did not forget all about her, he postponed thoughts of her to the coming holiday time. His reappearance on the boards

of the St. Martin's Theater was made the signal for a subdued, sympathetic ovation by which he was genuinely touched. Not only had he been missed, but knowledge of the domestic bereavement which had caused his absence touched an emotional chord in the breasts of a kindly audience. It was in that sense, anyhow, that he interpreted the demeanor of the house, and he showed his gratitude by playing his part to the very best of his ability.

"You were magnificent to-night," Shepherd said to him after the conclusion of the performance. "Upon my word, I don't think, at this rate, that we need bother our heads much about a fresh production. We could have finished the season without you; but, if we had, we should have finished the run, too. I only hope, for your own sake, that you haven't come into money enough to make you think of giving up the stage."

"You will be glad to hear, my dear fellow," answered Harold, who was just then in one of the exhilarated moods which sometimes took possession of him at the end of a perfectly successful evening, "that I haven't come into a penny piece. But even if I inherited a fortune I wouldn't chuck the stage. After all, there is nothing like it—nothing on earth that one would choose to substitute for it!"

CHAPTER IV

IMPRUDENCES

"WHAT sort of neighbors has your brother within reach of his parsonage?" asked Miss Lorna Fitzwalter. "Nice people?—young people?—pretty people?"

She was reclining upon carefully adjusted cushions in a punt, and she wore a pale-green costume which was less trying in the summer twilight than it might have been under the glare of broad day. Harold, who was leisurely punting her up-stream (and who would have been doing no such thing if he could have helped it), replied:

"Well, no; I should say that the majority of them were ugly and old and not particularly nice."

"But the minority? There is a minority—come! You don't, I suppose, expect me to believe that you are going to bury yourself for months in the depths of the country in order to enjoy the society of the parson and his sister."

"The parson, you must remember, is my brother, and his sister is my sister," returned Harold, in a tone of gentle remonstrance. "Is it so very incredible that I should wish to be with them for a time, after a compulsory separation of years?"

"Quite incredible to me," Miss Fitzwalter declared. "So much so that I am certain there is somebody else.

You might as well tell me who she is; you will admit that I am not ungenerous with regard to such matters."

In truth she was not; many a flirtation of his had been condoned by her in consideration of extenuating circumstances, of its almost inevitable character, and of his assurance that it was in no sense serious. But, for all that, she had occasional accesses of jealousy which demanded skilful treatment, as well as intuitions which were rarely at fault. How skilful was Harold's treatment of her and how delicate were his own intuitions may be inferred from the fact that he replied without hesitation:

"There is, now that you mention it, a minority of one. Her name is Lilian Ormond; she is decidedly pretty; her father is a squire whose property adjoins what used to be our property; I was upon friendly terms with her in her childhood, and she was kind enough to claim acquaintance with me on the day of my mother's funeral. There! Now you know all about her."

"Oh! Do I?"

"I mean you know as much about her as I do. If I make any further discoveries of interest during the summer I won't fail to inform you."

"You will certainly try to make further discoveries."

"Do you think so? Perhaps I shall; but in the case of these young ladies there is so seldom anything to discover. However, you will certainly question me, and your questions will be duly answered. I never have any secrets from you, have I?"

It was by means of judicious and singularly frank

confidences that he had gradually prevailed upon her to accept a part which she did not altogether fancy, yet which appealed to one side of her heart. She must have known, although she could not and would not acknowledge it to herself, that Harold Dunville did not love her; but she liked to believe that he told her everything, she liked to believe that his fancies for other women were ephemeral, she liked to think that, so far as they were concerned, he regarded her in a quasi-maternal light. Sometimes she favored him with sage counsels, at which it is needless to say that he took very good care not to smile. Not without reason, she flattered herself that she had a certain hold upon him. What may have been somewhat unreasonable on her part was the expectation that that hold would one day be fortified by legal and ecclesiastical sanction.

Meanwhile, his dexterity in staving off the approach of such a day was equaled only by the apparently unstudied ease with which he contrived to keep just short of definite pledges. Obvious considerations of prudence had served him in the past, for Lorna had not saved much, while he had saved nothing at all; in recent and more prosperous days his task had been less simple. Still, favored by luck, he had thus far pulled through, and although this Sunday evening jaunt on the river, as a wind-up to the theatrical season, was a rather more risky proceeding than he liked, it had at least the advantage of putting Lorna in a good humor. Moreover, he had invited all the other leading members of the company to share his hospitality, so that the protection of numbers was within hail. He did not avail himself of

that protection so long as his companion continued to discourse about Lilian Ormond, for he was alive to the peril of arousing her jealousy; but as soon as she showed signs of giving the conversation a more personal and a tenderer turn he looked at his watch and discovered that they had been keeping their friends waiting a scandalously long time.

Shepherd, who was among those friends, looked quickly and anxiously at the pair as they disembarked—at the lithe, languid, slightly cadaverous woman in her pale-green draperies, and the splendidly handsome young actor who, interpreting his glance, responded to it with a laugh.

"Good old Shepherd!" Harold whispered; "how well you deserve your name! But you needn't fret yourself; it's all right, and we're going to have a jolly evening."

The elaborate and protracted festivity which ensued beneath the trees on the river-bank did not lack jollity. Harold's guests were in high spirits, as it was only natural that they should be, with checks in their pockets and a well-earned holiday imminent; Lorna, always susceptible to such influences, soon became infected by their hilarity, and no one applauded more loudly than she when Mr. Sanford, Harold's understudy at the St. Martin's, jumped up to propose in flowery language the health of "our genial host." The genial host responded with geniality and felicity. He had a neat little compliment for each of his hearers, including the proposer of the toast, who had painstakingly but quite inadequately replaced him on the boards for a time.

"I really think," said he, "that we are entitled to congratulate ourselves and one another all round; but I am sure everybody here must feel, as I do, that there might have been a different tale to tell had we not been so fortunate as to secure the loyal cooperation and the charming talent of Miss Fitzwalter."

He knew she would like that. He also knew, and so did she, whose charming talent had made a great success out of a mediocre play; but there is a species of humbug which is not altogether humbug. Which of us is so churlish or so uncompromising a votary of truth as to spurn it when offered to us by those whom we love? Poor Miss Fitzwalter, pacing to and fro upon the platform at the railway-station shortly afterward, had but half-hearted protestations to enter against flattery which was so sweet and which might, after all, be genuine in one sense, if not in the most direct one. On that still, sultry night, with the stars shining overhead and the man whom she adored by her side, all sorts of improbable things seemed to her possible—and indeed Harold Dunville, while waiting for the train which was to take the whole party back to London, was most anxious to foster her realization of improbable possibilities. Look her up at Scarborough? Oh, but of course he would!—did she suppose that he meant to wait until the autumn for another sight of her? Ah, if it came to dates, that was different! When one is staying with one's people one must necessarily be guided a little by their plans, and she would understand how desirable it was for him to retain the tardily accorded amity of his people. But he would certainly take a short holiday as soon as he could do so

without risk of giving offense. He laughed heartily when he was charged with fearing to give offense to Miss Lilian Ormond. "I am afraid Miss Ormond would be as easily consoled as I should if we were never to meet again," he declared.

Presently the train came flashing and thundering in; the compartments reserved for Mr. Dunville and his party were filled by a chattering throng, whose chatter effectually precluded confidential intercourse, and all immediate danger was averted. Shepherd, somnolent in a corner, but not asleep, perceived during the short journey that danger had once again been averted and breathed more freely.

"So that is satisfactorily over," he remarked to Harold at Paddington, after Miss Fitzwalter had been driven off in a hansom. "It may be very clever to sail so near the wind; but I can't for the life of me see the use of it. However, as I say, there's an end of it for the present, and now the sooner you get away from London the better.

Harold also took a hansom and departed, a good deal tickled by his friend's solicitude. Shepherd had a quaint way of treating him as though he had been a raw lad, exposed, without knowledge or experience, to all the temptations of a great city. Yet he might fairly claim to know considerably more about women of all ranks than poor old Shepherd did. He knew how to deal with them, too; in an encounter between their wits and his he was not likely to come off second best. As for sailing near the wind, such tactics were apt to be forced upon a man; it was all right so long as you did not lose your head.

"Moreover," he reflected, with a sigh and a laugh, "I have lost my heart now, which is the best of all safeguards."

To a man of his temperament it was no very efficient safeguard, although, to be sure, it made him eager to quit London as soon as his arrangements would permit. These, being merely social, and for the most part easy to escape on the plea of his mourning, need not detain him long, he thought; there was but one, of a quasi-professional nature, which he could hardly evade. Together with many other leading actors, authors, artists, and musicians, he had promised to support an entertainment organized by sundry fashionable ladies in aid of a deserving charity, and he was to redeem his pledge by giving a recitation in the ducal mansion which had been generously placed at the disposal of the patronesses. Duchesses, as such, did not appeal much to him, nor could he ever quite forget that those whose equal he had a right to call himself had looked the other way when they met him until, all of a sudden, he had established a claim upon their smiles by proving his ability to amuse them; but he went to this variety show, partly because he had given his word that he would do so, partly because open-mouthed admiration, no matter from what quarter it might come, was welcome and stimulating to him.

Of this reward he was assured in advance; nor was his confidence in himself and in his audience disappointed. What he had to do was to recite a stirring, pathetic poem; and it pleased him to discharge his appointed task seated, without gesticulation or histrionic help of any kind. It was in that sort of performance that he ex-

celled. He was quite quiet, quite self-possessed; he let the words speak for themselves, emphasizing nothing. Only his marvelously melodious, sympathetic voice, which was so under control that he could do what he liked with it, would have made an epic out of a nursery rhyme, while his enunciation was faultless. The long, spacious saloon, bedecked with flowers and thronged with gaily attired listeners, remained silent, as if spellbound, until he had finished; then there swept across the length and breadth of it one of those subdued, protracted murmurs which mean so much more than clapping of hands or stamping of feet. The noisier form of applause followed presently; but Harold, who had risen from his chair with a bow and a smile, had already mingled with the crowd before it broke out.

He was, of course, at once assailed by congratulations and surrounded by congratulators of both sexes; he had expected nothing less, and was only elated in so far as the enthusiasm of those about him confirmed his self-approval. After a minute or two, however, his curiosity was aroused by the sight of a tall lady, with a bright, eager countenance, who was forcing her way in his direction with the evident intention of accosting him, although he was sure that he had never seen her before. At a distance he took her for a matron, the contrast between her dark eyebrows and her very light-colored hair giving her an appearance of age; but when she drew nearer he saw that she was still quite young and perhaps pretty. As a connoisseur in such matters, he mentally used the qualifying adverb; but he never used it again in thinking of her—nor, for the matter of that, the ad-

jective, either. For there was something about this young lady which caused her numerous victims to feel that all adjectives, as applied to her, were rather irrelevant. As soon as she came within reach of Harold she stretched out her hand to him, saying:

"Mr. Dunville, I must really thank you first and be introduced to you afterward, if I can find anybody to introduce me. I didn't believe that there was a man in England who could do that thing as you did it! It isn't in the least easy, you know."

Harold was a good deal amused. "Not quite so easy as it appears," he agreed; "but what gives me such a pull, you see, is that I am practically uneducated."

"You mean that you haven't been taught the wrong way? Oh, yes, there is that, no doubt; but the light of nature won't explain everything. I wish you wouldn't mind explaining, because you interest me immensely, do you know. Can't we get away somewhere and talk for a few minutes? But perhaps I had better tell you who I am first—or ask somebody to tell you."

She threw an impatient circular glance at the bystanders and clutched the lady of the house by the elbow. "Duchess, will you introduce me to Mr. Dunville, please?"

"Mr. Dunville," said the obedient duchess, "let me introduce you to Miss Gardiner."

"Daughter of Sir Joseph Gardiner, who is your brother's tenant," added the young lady. "I don't know whether that increases your pleasure in making my acquaintance or not; but I should imagine not. At the

worst, however, it's a mere coincidence. I am not responsible in any way for my father."

"I wonder," thought Harold, "whether your father is in any way responsible for you. If so, there must be a vein of originality about his character which hasn't come out as yet in the House of Commons."

He replied aloud that the pleasure of becoming acquainted with Miss Gardiner was far too great to be affected, one way or the other, by coincidences, whereupon she returned, consideringly:

"That's a very foolish remark to make; but I suppose you had to say something. Come into the picture-gallery and tell me about yourself; you can't think how anxious I am to hear. We will go without loss of time, please, or we shall have to wait until that man with the fiddle has finished doing his tricks."

She went on talking in the same assured, slightly patronizing style after they had betaken themselves to the deserted picture-gallery, and after she had motioned to him to sit down beside her in one of the deep embrasures of the windows.

"It is so phenomenal of you to be capable of such a performance!" she said. "In France one wouldn't have wondered, much as one would have admired; these things are done in France. There is Coquelin, of course, and there are any number of lesser lights. But here one only expects ranting and raving. Have you been in Paris? Where did you study? Naturally, what you said just now about being uneducated was nonsense."

It was something of a novelty to Harold, before whom great ladies had of late taken to prostrating themselves,

to be treated in that way. If he interested Miss Gardiner, she also began to interest him, and he was not unwilling to answer her rapid questions. He told her the truth, which was that he had had a few lessons in elocution, but that for the rest he relied upon an instinctive sense of what was needed in delivery; he also, in compliance with entreaties, gave her a *résumé* of his career, which was not untruthful, despite a considerable number of suppressions. The result of his confidences was to make her exclaim:

"All this shows that you must be extraordinarily clever! I am sorry to have to use such a feeble, commonplace word, but one can only take one's native language as one finds it. What a pity that you should be an actor!"

"You don't like actors?" asked Harold, smiling.

"It isn't so much that, as that there aren't any in London. I saw you act once; I thought you good, but nothing out of the way. You might be—oh, there are heaps of better things that you might be!"

"As, for instance?"

"Well, I don't know that I am prepared to reply upon the spur of the moment. Some other day we will talk you over at greater length. There will be another day, I hope."

"So do I; and there certainly will be if you are going to spend the summer in the country, for I shall be staying some weeks with my brother at Dunville rectory."

Miss Gardiner clapped her hands. "That decides me!" she cried. "I had been thinking of the Carpathians; but I now feel that the home circle, enlivened by

you, will be much more attractive. Well, I must be off. I can't tell you how glad I am to have met you."

Evidently she had no chaperon; for she walked straight down to the entrance-hall, where she made a sign to one of the waiting footmen and dismissed Harold with a friendly, gracious nod. He learned, from subsequent inquiries which he addressed to a lady who knew everybody, that she was the only child of Sir Joseph Gardiner and was therefore practically certain to inherit a very large fortune.

"Josephine Gardiner," his informant remarked, "is one of those girls whom one would call odd if so many of them didn't go in for being odd nowadays that it has become exceptional to be ordinary. Not exactly fast, you know; that isn't her line, though she affects unconventionality and male friends, does just what she likes and snaps her fingers at her parents. She is said to be intellectual; but I don't know that she has ever done much to deserve her reputation. She has been engaged ever so many times, and she always breaks off the engagement. Upon the whole, I wouldn't fall in love with her if I were you."

"I think I can promise not to fall in love with her," said Harold, laughing. "I confess, all the same, that I should like to see more of her."

"That won't be difficult, so long as you don't bore her or disappoint her; but most men, I imagine, end by doing both."

That Harold should then and there have resolved that he would do neither was a testimony alike to Miss Gardiner's fascinations and to his own inveterate imprudence where women were concerned.

CHAPTER V

THE TENANTS OF THE MANOR

In consequence of a sudden burst of very hot weather, Sir Joseph Gardiner, having secured a pair for the remainder of the session, left London and betook himself to the peaceful seclusion of Kent. He was a thin little man, with untidy hair of a sandy gray color, an upturned nose, weak, blinking eyes, and straggling whiskers which met under his chin. Negligible from a social point of view and very generally neglected, he nevertheless counted for something in the political world, inasmuch as he was wealthy and could speak with a certain lucidity and force, both in the House and out of it, when required to do so. This did not often happen, and the rarity of his utterances added no doubt to their weight. He would not, of course, have been where he was, or what he was, had he not possessed considerable business capacities; but he had for some years retired from active commercial pursuits, and his leisure hours were now divided between the perusal of Blue-books and the arranging, weeding, and perfecting of his celebrated collection of postage-stamps. He was a charitable, harmless, taciturn mortal, who had the appearance of only asking to be let alone, which modest demand on his part was almost invariably granted by both his family and his friends.

On this occasion, however, his wife was, by a mere coincidence, accompanying him to Dunville manor. Lady Gardiner, who was stout, felt the heat a good deal, and was, moreover, tired of entertaining in London, a duty which was at no time particularly enjoyable to her. It was, therefore, Sir Joseph's privilege to be accommodated in the saloon carriage which she had ordered to be in readiness at Charing Cross (Sir Joseph, when alone, usually traveled second-class), and perhaps he would have valued that privilege more highly if he had not shared it with her ladyship's numerous dogs. A couple of Schipperkes, a black Spitz, an Aberdeen terrier, and a Dandie Dinmont—all young, lively, and under no sort of control—are ill fitted to act as traveling companions to the elderly; but Lady Gardiner did not seem to be in the least disturbed by their vociferous encounters, while her spouse was well aware of the futility of remonstrances. Not a word was exchanged between the two human occupants of the carriage until the journey was half over, when Sir Joseph, with the air of having suddenly remembered something, said, "My dear!"

"Hullo!" responded Lady Gardiner drowsily from behind a newspaper.

"What about Josephine? Did I understand you that she was going abroad?"

Lady Gardiner dropped her paper, yawned, and stroked her chin reflectively. "Let me see; what was it that she told me last night? Either that she was going or that she had changed her mind; I really can't remember."

"She remains in London, then, for the present?"

"I suppose so. I shouldn't think she would come down to Dunville, anyhow; there isn't anything for her to do there, you know."

"Doesn't it seem rather odd," hazarded Sir Joseph, after an interval of silence, "for a girl to be living in London all by herself? When I was young——"

"Oh, my dear man, what is the use of harking back to prehistoric times? Josephine is all right. Odd, if you like; but that's what she purposely goes in for being, and her oddity isn't of a kind to cause anxiety. Would you mind asking Billy to stop teasing Chatterbox? He won't bite you if you take hold of him firmly. Oh, not like that, bless your soul! You should have gripped him by the scruff of the neck and the tail. Now you *will* get bitten, and I must say it serves you right."

A general scrimmage, in which Lady Gardiner was compelled to take part, ensued, and the interrupted discussion was not resumed when peace, with some loss of breath all round, had been restored. It was in truth very little the habit of this detached, yet not unfriendly, pair to discuss their only child, whose independence of them both had been for some time past an accomplished and accepted fact. Sir Joseph, being an old-fashioned person, had intermittent qualms; but Lady Gardiner had come to a comfortable understanding with her daughter. "You can't have it both ways, you know," she had remarked. "If you choose to strike out a line for yourself, my responsibility ceases, that's all, and you mustn't blame me for any little inconveniences that may come upon you."

Josephine, having willingly undertaken not to be so

unreasonable as that, her mother had at once composed herself to slumber.

Lady Gardiner slept a good deal in the course of the day and night. When awake, she found occupation chiefly with her pets, for she had monkeys and parrots, as well as dogs, and although age and bulk had put a stop to her riding, she still took great interest in the stable. By birth she was her husband's superior, a circumstance to which she never alluded and which she probably never forgot; he had given her ample means, while she had bestowed upon him in return what had once upon a time possessed a certain value for him, admission upon a footing of intimacy into aristocratic circles; the bargain, owing to the amenable temperament of both bargainers, had worked out very satisfactorily, and if they had little in common, overt dissensions between them were unknown. It did not in the least matter, for instance, that Sir Joseph sat in Parliament as an advanced Radical, whereas his wife belonged to one of the most rigidly Tory families in England, nor did they fall out respecting questions of plans and domicile, each being at liberty to form these without reference to the other. In London they scarcely met at all, and at Dunville seldom before the dinner-hour; for Lady Gardiner always breakfasted up-stairs, and Sir Joseph's appearances at luncheon were rare.

Sir Joseph did not honor that meal with his presence a few days later, when a party of three came up from the rectory by invitation to partake of her ladyship's hospitality. Lady Gardiner had a genuine esteem for her landlord, and Anne often amused her; she had become

after a fashion intimate with them, although she was apt to forget all about them unless some association of ideas, such as her return to Kent, chanced to recall them to her remembrance. She had entirely forgotten their recent bereavement until reminded of it by the sight of Anne's sable attire.

"Oh, yes—your poor mother, to be sure!" she ejaculated, with artless and apologetic candor. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have asked you to lunch. But there's nobody else, and one must eat even if the heavens fall, mustn't one? Mrs. Dunville must have been an old woman, too; I recollect her as elderly when I was a girl, and goodness knows I'm no chicken! This, of course, is your distinguished brother, whom I am so glad to meet."

She held out a fat, jeweled hand to Harold, adding: "Somebody told me that you were staying at the rectory, and I thought I should like to see you. Very good of you to come. My daughter gave me an enthusiastic description of you a short time ago. Didn't she hear you sing beautifully somewhere or other? Oh, no; you don't sing, do you? What was it that you did?"

"On that occasion," answered Harold, smiling, "I was made to recite; but I can't flatter myself that I recited beautifully."

"I expect you did, or Josephine wouldn't have cracked you up like that. In such matters Josephine isn't a fool."

"I am quite sure," said Harold, politely, "that nobody will ever accuse Miss Gardiner of being that, although her kindness may have led her to praise me beyond my deserts. Has she come down with you?"

He was a little disappointed to learn that she had not, and that Lady Gardiner could not say whether she was coming later on or not. He had already had another and a more severe disappointment in the shape of the information rather maliciously imparted to him by Anne that Lilian Ormond was away from home. It looked as though a rather dreary period might be in store for him.

A most excellent luncheon was in store for him, and this helped to raise his spirits; for he was always appreciative of refinement in the matter of food and drink. He was also entertained by the conversation, which was kept up for the most part by his hostess and his sister, and was of the desultory character habitual to the former. Lady Gardiner and Anne resembled one another in freedom of speech, if in nothing else, and, although allies, they seldom met without exchanging a few home truths. Thus her ladyship was accused of being culpably lazy, indifferent, and self-indulgent, while her accuser had to repudiate as best she might a charge of meddling overmuch in parish matters. Such mutual recriminations did not seem to make them at all angry; perhaps one of them was too fat and the other too tough to mind.

"The puzzle to me," Lady Gardiner casually remarked, "is to see your future. So long as your poor mother lived there was a definite place and a definite job for you; but now that she is gone, and that you have come into your inheritance, and that Mr. Dunville, I suppose, will soon be thinking of marrying—— "

"Mr. Dunville," interrupted Dick from the head of

the table, which he had been requested to take, "doesn't contemplate any step of the kind, I assure you."

"No man that I ever heard of does; but nine out of ten end by taking it all the same. You will certainly marry—and then what becomes of your sister?"

"She moves up to London and keeps house for me, perhaps," Harold suggested.

"No, she doesn't, thank you," returned Anne, decisively; "I should enjoy that arrangement as much as you would, which is putting matters strongly. No! I shall stay where I am for the present. I make so bold as to think that there are still some jobs for me to perform; though it is true that I shall have to look out for them; instead of deliberately looking the other way, as some people do."

Lady Gardiner did not respond to this challenge; the subject had probably ceased to interest her. She said, after a few seconds of silence:

"Mr. Dunville, I wish you would tell me what you think of Billy. Some people say he is rather too much on the leg; but he has taken a couple of first prizes, for all that."

"Which is Billy?" asked Dick. "One of these two new Schipperkes, I presume."

"Yes; the bigger one. His real name is William the Silent, to distinguish him from Chatterbox; but in the family circle he is called Billy, for short. I don't pretend to be very well up in the points of his breed; but I gave a long price for him. Was I swindled, do you think?"

The rector, who was an acknowledged authority on

dogs and horses, called up the whole pack in turn, examined them, gave it as his opinion that Billy was at all events good enough to be very highly commended at any show, and then said:

"Do you know that every one of these dogs is suffering more or less from red itch?"

"Oh, are they?" exclaimed Lady Gardiner; "how wretched for them, poor dears! That accounts, perhaps, for their scratching so perpetually. They kept waking me up all last night by rattling their hocks upon the floor. What does one do for them when they are afflicted in that way?"

"Well, I'll send you up some ointment this evening; but the main thing is to give them plenty of fresh air, green food, and no meat."

"But they won't touch their dinners without meat," Lady Gardiner objected.

"You may depend upon it that they will after twenty-four hours. You are like those cruel parents who ruin their children by giving in to them."

A grunt from Anne seemed to intimate that she associated herself with the speaker's sentiments, and Lady Gardiner, replying to her rather than to him, declared:

"I haven't ruined Josephine; I never saw anybody look less like a ruin than she does. As for giving in to her, it was a case of Hobson's choice. Do you suppose that one can put a collar round girls' necks and chain them up to kennels?"

"I should think that, in a metaphorical sense, the thing might be done," said Anne.

"Ah, well! that only shows how little you know about it, my dear. Now we will leave these two gentlemen to smoke, and perhaps they will join us presently in the stable-yard. I should like Mr. Dunville just to run his eye over the cobs before you go."

The hint conveyed in the last three words was not lost upon one of the two gentlemen, to whom it was always rather depressing to be treated as a cipher, and who remarked, while he lighted his cigarette: "One's successors are not over and above ceremonious, are they? Perhaps it is a mistake to have successors—or, at all events, to visit them."

"Lady Gardiner," answered Dick, "is nothing if not unceremonious; she deals with us as she would deal with anybody and everybody. As tenants, she and her husband are all that could be desired; they make no demands and undertake repairs which they are not bound by their lease to undertake. She is extremely charitable, too. Her taking you for a singer was stupid, but it was not meant for swagger or impertinence. She really didn't know."

"Her ignorance," observed Harold, laughing, "constitutes her offense. At least, it would if I cared. But I don't care. Why on earth should I?"

He cared a little; he had grown sufficiently accustomed to adulation to miss it; he was beginning to be bored, and boredom was of all sensations the one which he most detested. When, after an interval, his brother and he obeyed instructions by walking across to the stables, and when, during the tour of inspection, Lady Gardiner's broad back was persistently turned toward him,

he asked himself whether even Scarborough would not perhaps be better fun than this. Fortune, however, was, as it happened, upon the point of turning her wheel in his favor. Mounted on two wheels, a lady who really wished very much to meet him again (though he feared that she entertained no such desire) was speeding toward Dunville manor, and while Dick and Lady Gardiner were still anxiously examining the cob's near foreleg, Miss Ormond jumped off her bicycle and joined the group.

Harold, in consequence of his hostess's preoccupation, was the first to greet the new arrival. He said, with unaffected and irrepressible pleasure: "I *am* glad! They told me you were away from home."

"I came back last night," answered the girl, whose responsive smile and slight blush were delightful to him. "I heard that Lady Gardiner had arrived, but I didn't expect to find you here."

"I am sure he can't have expected to find himself here," Anne struck in, "for he knows very little about horses. But I presume he was invited to luncheon, as I was, in order that Dick, who knows more than most people, might be secured."

"My dear child," exclaimed Lady Gardiner, turning round, "how good of you to lose no time in looking me up! Well, how are you?—and how are all your people? Your father free from gout, I hope?"

Poor Mr. Ormond was seldom free from gout, and if there was one thing more likely than another to bring on an attack of his malady it was the bland good humor with which Lady Gardiner ignored his firm hostility.

He abhorred the Gardiners, both as Radicals and as interlopers, he avoided every occasion of meeting them, and only with difficulty had he been prevailed upon to let his wife leave cards at their door; but Lady Gardiner did not seem to care—and in truth did not care—whether he abhorred her or not. He was to her merely an old gentleman who lived somewhere in the neighborhood and had gout; she would not have remembered even as much as that about him, had not she herself been afflicted with occasional twinges of the same disorder. But she was fond of Lilian, whose hand she now held and patted affectionately, saying:

"Let us go and squat ourselves down somewhere in the shade until it is time for tea. We haven't got to attend to parochial duties in this grilling sun, you and I, like our friends here, thank goodness!"

After that there was nothing for the friends in question to do but to take their leave, although it could hardly be supposed that the poor of the parish had claims upon one of them. That Harold departed with reluctance his eyes announced. It has been mentioned already that he had eloquent eyes, and if they did not announce something more than that when he wished Miss Ormond goodby, they were, at any rate, meant to do so. He said, gently and wistfully:

"We shall meet again before very long, I hope."

To which she replied: "Oh, I hope so. You are under a promise to come and call upon us, you know."

Then he followed his brother and sister out of the stable-yard, and Lady Gardiner remarked: "Nice-looking and nice-mannered, but a little short of—what is it

that he is short of, I wonder? It can't be breeding; yet one feels that there is a deficiency somewhere."

"I don't notice it," Lilian declared; "I don't know what you mean. His mother, I think, showed an extraordinary deficiency of natural affection for him."

"Maybe she did; although she was a shrewd old woman, and I seem to remember some story about his having played the deuce all round when he was younger. However, he doesn't particularly signify, does he? Come and talk to Lord Chancellor. He was so delighted to see me back last night, dear boy, that he tore my cap off and devoured it."

Having greeted, from a respectful distance, the savage and repulsive baboon to whom Lady Gardiner alluded, and who, in deference to the prejudices of the household, was kept securely chained, Lilian was taken the round of the menagerie; after which she had to listen to a disjointed, but occasionally graphic, review of recent fashionable intelligence. It was not until late in the afternoon, by which time Lady Gardiner had talked herself sleepy, that she was released. Speeding on her bicycle down the long, winding drive which led from the heights on which Dunville Manor stands to the village, she said to herself that she had shown benevolence to a would-be benevolent old lady, but that her virtue had been its own and only reward. She would very much have preferred to go back to the rectory with Anne, to have one of those chats with the rector which she always enjoyed, and also to hear from Mr. Harold Dunville what his plans were. Her desires presented themselves to her in that order, and everybody knows that in all proces-

sions the most important participant walks last. Alas! how could Harold be otherwise than of importance to her, considering that their eyes had met and that the language of his had been past misunderstanding? That language might or might not have found an echo in her heart; but the fact of his having used it was bound in any case to make him important.

It scarcely took her by surprise to find him sauntering past the great iron entrance-gates when she emerged upon the highroad; though his start and joyful exclamation were well feigned, if they were (as of course they were) mere manifestations of his histrionic skill. As a matter of fact, he had been hanging about there for the best part of an hour; but he said:

"What luck to have just hit you off! What can you have discovered to talk about to Lady Gardiner all this long time?"

"Oh, I wasn't called upon to start subjects," answered the girl, laughing; "she had plenty of things to talk about."

"And people, too, I suppose."

"Yes, naturally; but she is very kind-hearted; she had nothing ill-natured to say about any of them."

"Not even about me? I wonder what she said about me; for she is sure to have said something."

"Not much; and of course I am not going to repeat what she did say. But why should you care to know?"

"I have the sort of curiosity," Harold answered, "that a forlorn traveler has on entering a strange country, or an unfortunate little boy when he is [illegible]

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his parents at his first school. One would fain hear whether it is to be peace or war."

Lilian had got off her bicycle and he was walking beside her up a rather steep hill which skirted the village. As she made no rejoinder, he continued presently:

"The atmosphere of this neighborhood seems to me to breathe hostility. Or, if that is too strong a word to use, I will say that you are all disposed to look askance at me. Well, I don't complain of that. I have been a bankrupt and I am an actor, two circumstances which are unlikely to commend me to the favor of county society. However, I may truly say that I don't care a straw about county society; the only thing that I do care about——"

Here he came to so prolonged a pause that his companion had no choice but to say, "Yes."

"I was going to say that all I care about is what *you* think of me. I don't want them to persuade you that I am a scamp. Because I really am not that."

He had already told her so; but perhaps, having seen so many people since, he had forgotten it, although she had not. Her reply, at any rate, was entirely satisfactory.

"You may be sure," she declared, turning her face toward him, "that if anything is said against you in my presence I shall not believe a word of it. I never do believe what is said against my friends, and even if I did, they would not be the less my friends. One admires people who have never done wrong in their lives; but it is a little difficult to like them, don't you think so?"

Thus they walked on together through the lanes, and

if Anne Dunville had overheard their conversation, she would have been an angry as well as an anxious woman. Yet Harold was upon his very best behavior, while Lilian avowed no sentiments to which exception could fairly have been taken by a vigilant chaperon.

CHAPTER VI

A FACILE VICTORY

THE REVEREND RICHARD DUNVILLE was considered to be an excellent preacher and may be said to have deserved his reputation; for he spoke fluently, it was pleasant, as well as easy, to listen to him, and there was never any possibility of misunderstanding what he meant. His sermons, being designed for rustic audiences, were practical, direct, and worded in the simplest language; his imagery, often very happy, was borrowed from the woods, the fields, and the atmosphere; the doctrines and standard of conduct which he inculcated were of a nature to come home alike to the educated and the unlettered; so that the squires of the vicinity and their families gradually dropped into the habit of attending church twice on Sundays. They generally went a second time, that is, when the curate preached in the morning. But inasmuch as Mr. Dunville spoke without notes and with no apparent effort, it was assumed that the preparation of his weekly discourses cost him but little time or trouble. As a matter of fact, he took a great deal of trouble over them and spent many nocturnal hours in getting them into shape; for he had what his brother was accused by some critics of lacking, the true artistic temperament; his job had to be a neat job if it was to satisfy him, and

every artist whose art is concerned with the tongue or the pen knows how much harder it is to be lucid than to be ornate.

Consequently, he was pacing up and down his study, with his hands behind his back and a frown upon his brow, when the day on which he had lunched with Lady Gardiner was within five minutes of expiring. Harold, to whom the luxury of going to bed early had the charm of novelty, had long ago retired to rest; but Anne, it seemed, had not; for a brisk rap at the door was followed by her equally brisk entrance, and——

"Look here, Dick," said she, proceeding straight to the point, as her habit was. "What is going to be done about this?"

"About what?" the rector inquired, leaning back against his writing-table, while his sister seated herself in his armchair.

"You know what I mean. About Harold and Lil Ormond, of course. You heard what he said during dinner. He is going to Beechwood to-morrow, and, to save time, we may as well take it for granted that he will be at Beechwood on most days of the week henceforth."

"That sounds to me like taking a good deal for granted; but what if he is?"

"Only that there will be trouble if he is. There would be trouble even if he were serious; but he is never serious."

"I don't quite see how you can be sure of that, Anne."

"No; and it doesn't matter, so long as one *is* sure. Now, appealing to him is useless. I tried it just now;

I reminded him of what I had said about flirting with Lil and charged him with a breach of contract."

"To which, I suppose, he replied that he wasn't aware of having entered into any contract."

"Exactly so. It therefore becomes a question whether you are not in duty bound to put her on her guard."

"Oh, dear, no!" answered the rector, shaking his head; "I am perfectly clear that it is not my duty to do anything of the sort."

"Nor your inclination, Dick?"

"Nor my inclination."

"Then all I can say is it ought to be. You have great influence over her, and you know you have. You know also that it would be a disastrous thing for her to lose her heart to Harold. Oh, you needn't go on shaking your head; for, however chivalrous you may be, you are not a fool. It is pretty certain, I think, that she has not lost her heart to him yet; but she may from one day to another, unless you speak a word in season. A word from you would go a long way, whereas anything that I might say would be likely to do more harm than good. Now, are you going to speak that word?"

"Most certainly not. Do you realize that you are asking me to abuse my religious influence over Miss Ormond? I doubt whether it amounts to much; but, such as it is, I am not to employ it in order to put spokes in my brother's wheel. Moreover, there is absolutely nothing against him that I am aware of."

"But when I tell you that he is not serious!"

Dick seated himself upon the table, swinging his legs

and laughing. There were moments when he looked like a boy, and indeed his was one of those rare natures which remain forever young in the sense that they contrive, by some means or other, to keep themselves unspotted from the world.

"It won't do, my dear Anne," said he. "Your intentions are of the very best, but you are suggesting a line of action which isn't straight. And that, I must say, is not at all like you."

"Well, well!" returned Anne, with a sorrowful little laugh, "perhaps you can guess why I suggest it."

"Yes, I can guess," her brother owned, his sunburnt face becoming a little redder. "So can you guess, perhaps, why I must be the last person in the world to interfere. There is this to be said—that, so far as my own chances are concerned, it makes no difference whatsoever. I believe she is really attached to me, and I hope she always will be; but—the fact remains that I might almost be her father."

"You couldn't possibly be her father, Dick."

"I said 'almost'; the difference between almost and altogether is so small that it doesn't count. Moreover, I can't really afford to marry; my income is too precarious. Don't look so sad about it; I shall pull through all right, and any pangs that I may have to endure will be no worse than I deserve for having been such an ass as to fall in love at my age."

"It is a dreadful pity—all of it!" sighed Anne.

"It may be, or it may not; one can never tell. For my own part, I have a much better opinion of Harold than you have."

"You are going to look on and do nothing, then?"

"I am going, I humbly hope, to behave like a gentleman."

"H'm! I don't believe *he* is. What one forlornly hopes for is that he may give himself away before the mischief is done; but it is scarcely safe to count upon that. What you say about your age is sheer nonsense, you know."

"I am afraid, on the contrary, that it is sheer common sense. Anyhow, it is not nonsense about my income."

Thereupon Anne made proposals which brought down a sharp rebuke upon her. Her means, in truth, were but barely sufficient to render her independent, and she was not so foolish as to contemplate living under her brother's roof after his marriage. Nor was she foolish enough to persist with arguments or to offer condolences. Dick and she understood one another very well indeed, and were united by bonds of affection which stood in need of no verbal support. In her heart she was fain to acknowledge that he was right, that there was nothing to be done, that interference was as much out of the question on his part as it would be unavailing on hers. Nevertheless, she fretted under this obligatory inaction. Why was Harold to have things all his own way?

Harold would have told her that he very seldom got his own way, and that statement would have been the more true because he was so seldom able to ascertain precisely what his own way was. However, he was in no doubt as to the pleasure that it gave him to visit Beechwood Hall, whither, in fulfilment of Anne's prediction,

he now began to make his way on most days of the week. The Ormond family took a fancy to him, which was not surprising; for although he took no particular fancy to any of them, save one, he made himself without difficulty pleasant to them all. The choleric head of the house liked what he considered the young man's independent spirit; Mrs. Ormond, a kind-hearted, busy, elderly lady, who was notorious in the county for her active benevolence and her want of tact, told him to his face how delighted she was to find him quite a gentleman; the youths and maidens who completed the establishment, and who rendered it a somewhat obstreperous one when, as now, they were at home for the holidays, unanimously pronounced him "a good sort."

"Your people," he remarked, laughingly, to Lilian one day, "were so unprepared to see me behave like an ordinary member of civilized society that they are more than half inclined to make me out a paragon. I don't know whether I ought to be flattered or affronted; perhaps I had better split the difference and be merely acquiescent. After all, I have every reason to be grateful to them, since their amiability enables me to see almost as much of you as I want."

If he wanted to see more of her than he did, he must have been insatiable; but to what lover does not that adjective apply? Within a very short space of time he became a practically avowed, if not a practically acknowledged, lover. Why Miss Ormond's parents, who, with all their esteem for the Dunville family, would hardly have liked to see their daughter married to an actor, abstained from interference it is a little difficult to say. Possibly,

being a good deal engrossed with matters which did not directly concern them, they failed to notice what was taking place under their noses; possibly they shrank from prematurely snubbing a charming visitor who might never need to be snubbed at all. They could, in any case, have accomplished but little; for Lilian's heart was quickly won.

This was, for her own sake, a pity, since mortal men are so constituted that they can never set a great price upon what is to be secured at small pains; but Harold, to do him justice, did not consciously undervalue his prize. That it was his, or might be any day for the asking, he knew, and the knowledge gave him thrills of happiness and exultation which were in no sense the result of gratified vanity. He felt, and often said to himself, that he was altogether unworthy of the girl whom he loved as he had never loved before in his life; he was quite humble, notwithstanding his beatitude. It was not, however, humility that restrained him, during those golden days, from verbally announcing his passion, but rather an appreciation of them so intense that he was reluctant to bring them to an end. Matrimonial engagements are, alas! of necessity practical, business-like affairs; they entail discussions inevitably wounding to the finer feelings; they call for settlements (what on earth had he to settle upon his future bride?) and are only too apt—in the event of settlements proving unsatisfactory—to bring about opposition, argument, strife, and sorrow. Perhaps, too, there may have lurked in the depths of his mind some warning memory of how alarmed he had always hitherto been when his love-

affairs had seemed to be approaching a climax, how invariably he had run away, glad and thankful to have recovered his liberty, shuddering at the narrowness of his escape.

Be that as it may, he kept silence and was happy, Lilian visibly sharing his happiness. Like Harold, she knew that she was loved; like him, she was in no hurry to conclude that phase of courtship which is the most blissful of mundane experiences; unlike him, she looked forward with perfect assurance to a blissful future. Day after day they wandered about together, uninterrupted and unhindered, while the rest of the large home party, who good-naturedly abstained from spoiling sport, played the games appropriate to the season; they exchanged personal confidences of the kind which is always so deeply interesting to those concerned in them and so very much the reverse to everybody else; their eyes met continually, sometimes also their hands; neither of them was destined ever to forget wholly that summer-time of sweet illusion.

In after-days one of them dated the first premonitory disturbance of illusion from a certain evening when she was taking leave of Harold under the stone archway which formed the somewhat pretentious entrance to her father's domain. Along the highroad, while they were standing there, came a phaeton, drawn by a pair of swift gray cobs, which Harold recognized at once as Lady Gardiner's; but it was not Lady Gardiner who held the reins. The driver, whose flaxen hair and dark eyebrows had rendered her noticeable to him on another scene, pulled up as soon as she caught sight of him, and greeted him

with a familiar little wave of the hand. She likewise greeted Miss Ormond, to whom she called out a trifle patronizingly:

"How are you, Lil? But your face answers for you; you are as fresh as one of your own daisies. Oh, there are advantages about living in the country all the year round, and if I had any looks worth preserving, I believe I would give your receipt a trial."

In point of looks she was certainly no match for the girl to whom she spoke, but, on the other hand, she was a good deal better dressed than Lilian. Perhaps she was aware of that, and aware also that Harold's trained eye had already begun to draw unavoidable comparisons. Turning to the latter, with as little formality as if she had known him all her life, she went on:

"Won't you come and dine this evening? We have a few people staying in the house whom it might amuse you to meet."

Glancing at his watch, Harold answered: "Thanks very much, but I am afraid it is rather too late."

"Not if I drive you home. That would give you heaps of time to dress even if we dined punctually, a thing which never happens. Jump in, and I will deposit you at the rectory before you know where you are."

He obeyed orders; Miss Josephine Gardiner, whose orders were very generally obeyed, would have been much surprised if he had not, and in the present instance it would perhaps have been churlish to meet her proffered civility with a refusal. Nevertheless, he was vaguely conscious of having been made to inflict a species of snub upon Lilian, and this irritated him with his companion,

who, while she conducted him at a high rate of speed along roads and lanes, appeared to be serenely indifferent to his irritation. She threw disconnected questions and remarks at him over her shoulder, paying little attention to his rather gruff replies.

"Are you going to stay down here until the shooting begins? I haven't made up my mind yet whether I shall or not. It is deadly dull, of course. Restful, though, if rest is what one wants, as I dare say it is in your case. How the sight of such modern sort of people as we are occupying Dunville Manor must jar upon you! Still, in some ways we are less objectionable than we should be if we had always belonged to the county, don't you think so? More suggestive of being transient, I mean."

"I hope, for my brother's sake, that you are not transient," Harold said.

"You don't hope it for your own, then? Well, it is true that there is no reason in the world why you should. How have you been enjoying yourself in these benighted parts? Very much indeed? But that is impossible, surely! Oh, I see!"

She laughed a little and resumed, after a short pause: "Rustic flirtations are all very well, and I remember now having been told in London that you were given to flirting; but I rather hope, do you know, that you won't persevere with this one. Lil Ormond is quite pretty and altogether nice, if she hasn't a superfluity of brains; but you are sure to tire of her soon, and it isn't so certain that she will tire of you. These considerations ought to be borne in mind when it is a mere question of amusing

oneself. Wouldn't a dairymaid answer your purpose just as well?"

"If you will kindly allow me to get out," said Harold, "I think I will walk the rest of the way."

"Sorry I can't oblige you," answered Miss Gardiner, imperturbably, "but if we were to part like this you wouldn't come to dinner, and I want you to come to dinner. Shall I apologize for my impertinence? I am prepared, under pressure, to go that length."

"I really think," Harold returned, "that you owe me an apology."

"I beg your pardon, then. All the same, my words were words of wisdom, and I am less flippant than you think me. But perhaps you don't very much care what I am?"

"Since you ask me, I don't," answered Harold, with just a shade too much emphasis to vex her.

"Well," she coolly rejoined, "I hope you are going to care. It would be too disappointing to have turned one's back upon the Carpathians for the sake of a person who really didn't care. Anyhow, you are going to take me in to dinner to-night."

Some two hours later he did take her in to dinner, and, despite the intention of subjugating him which she had as good as proclaimed, despite the contemptuous self-reliance which had provoked him into resolving that he would humiliate her before he had done with her, he found her a fascinating and stimulating neighbor. She devoted her whole attention to him throughout a repast to which twenty more or less distinguished persons sat down; her conversation was not flippant, but was that of

a well-informed woman who expressed herself tersely and sometimes wittily; she flattered him by taking it for granted that he was no ordinary man; she solicited his opinions respecting subjects upon which he was hardly qualified to speak authoritatively; she listened to them with appreciative interest, and she never said a word about the stage from start to finish. For the rest, her attire was magnificent, her diamonds, which far outshone her mother's (to whom, as a matter of detail, they belonged), were dazzling; her voice and her whole manner had a certain magnetic attraction.

When, in the course of the evening, somebody asked her to play, she sat down to the piano and displayed a mastery over that instrument which could only be the result of first-class instruction and constant practise; also she talked politics with an ex-Cabinet minister in a style indicative of her being behind the scenes. She was altogether the most conspicuous figure in a gathering by no means commonplace, and everybody seemed willing to acknowledge her as such. Was she, Harold wondered, showing off her accomplishments?—and, if so, for whose benefit? After dinner he obtained no speech of her until the time came for him to leave, when she said:

"You must look us up again without loss of time, please; I shall be literally pining for you. Besides, you have nothing else to do, I am sure; for I can't imagine that Beechwood is more than a *pis-aller*."

His taciturn little host trotted out into the hall after him and murmured something about the pleasure of having entertained one of the celebrated actors of the day.

"My celebrity doesn't amount to much," answered

Harold, laughing, " and I have been trying to forget that I am an actor. Miss Gardiner, when she was so good as to invite me, didn't allude to the circumstance; she gave me to understand that her hospitality was due to a kindly wish to see something of a neighbor."

" Oh, I don't think it would be that," said the little man, quite seriously; " Josephine doesn't care much about her neighbors. I think it was only that we were an uneven number for dinner, owing to one of our guests having been called away unexpectedly this morning. She said she would go out and pick up somebody for us; it is really marvelous the way she manages these things! Because of course her coming across you must have been a mere accident."

CHAPTER VII

THE SUGGESTIONS OF JOSEPHINE

THE three days which followed that of his dinner at Dunville Manor were long and dismal ones for Harold. There was absolutely nothing to do at the rectory, nor had he any temptation to walk over to Beechwood Hall; for Lilian—as she had considerately found means of letting him know—had been called away to the other side of the county by a sudden invitation from friends who had a cricket party, which was to wind up with a dance. Even Dick, who had once been a great cricketer and was still no mean performer for his years, had been persuaded to join this gathering; so that Anne's rather caustic conversation was deprived of the usual mitigating influence which made for peace. On the third day, however, Dick, being disqualified alike by his profession and his mourning from attending dances, returned, and on the morning of the fourth Harold borrowed his brother's horse and trap, with the intention of paying his respects to a lady who, he hoped, had missed him as much as he had missed her.

He was in the act of setting forth when a note, which had just arrived from Dunville Manor, was delivered to him. It was written in a big, sprawling, semi-masculine hand, and it conveyed Miss Gardiner's wish that, if he

had nothing better to do, he would come up to luncheon. "Nobody but ourselves, and if that means my mother and the dogs and me, it's about all it does mean. The last lot of stayers have left and the next batch doesn't arrive till to-morrow; so please take pity on us. I have all sorts of things to say to you which I had no opportunity of saying the other night. Verbal answer will do."

It took Harold a minute, but no more, to decide upon despatching a verbal acceptance by the bearer. After all, he could see Lilian when he pleased, and it seemed a pity that Miss Gardiner should be denied the chance of saying anything to him that she might want to say. Moreover, he felt some curiosity to hear what she wanted to say.

His curiosity was not gratified when she received him in the great, cool saloon, where her mother was also seated. Lady Gardiner, who had evidently been indulging in a nap, and who had two dogs upon her knees, begged to be excused for not rising. Nothing, she said, exasperated Timothy so much as being abruptly disturbed, and he was apt, when disturbed, to take vengeance upon the legs of intruders. "I can put him down quite safely as soon as the gong goes, for he understands as well as possible what that means; but as for going up-stairs and washing one's hands, he hasn't the patience to allow it. So perhaps you will let me sit down unwashed."

Harold intimated that she had his full permission to perform or omit any preliminary ceremony. Miss Gardiner, without requesting his permission, returned to the writing-table, from which she had got up on his entrance,

and resumed her occupation of dashing off hurried letters. He watched her, while her mother somnolently conversed, and wondered whether that sort of behavior was a *pose* or not. Afterward, when he came to know her better, he realized that it was not, and that, if her manners were bad, this was simply because she belonged so completely and unaffectedly to a generation which has no manners at all. She probably forgot that he was in the room until the sound of the gong, desired by Lady Gardiner and Timothy, recalled her to actualities. Then she jumped up, remarking to her guest:

"What a welcome change it must be to you to get your meals regularly again! Ordinarily, I suppose, you feed at the most eccentric hours."

"Well, at hours which you would call eccentric," Harold answered; "but I don't know that it matters much. One can accustom oneself to anything."

"Oh, of course; only there are certain things which must always seem abnormal to you, I should think. You can't, surely, feel it to be natural that we should be living in this house, and that you, in the character of an actor on a holiday, should be entertained by us."

"I don't know whether it is unnatural or not; it is very pleasant," Harold politely declared.

He found it so. The delicacies provided for him were really delicacies, and he knew enough about the culinary art to recognize their excellence, while he did not as yet know quite enough about Miss Gardiner to place her. He saw, to be sure, that she was bent upon spurring his interest in her; but, so far as that went, she did not differ from fifty other ladies. Her individuality was still to

seek, and he suspected her of intentionally concealing it, although she appeared to say just what came into her head.

"I have been going in for photography lately," she informed him as soon as luncheon was over. "It is a great nuisance to my friends and rather a nuisance to myself; but until it finally palls it will have to be endured. Come out into the garden and be victimized."

Lady Gardiner and the dogs were invited to do likewise. There was a tent on the lawn to which they were conducted, and in front of which they were made to group themselves. Then the monkey was sent for, as well as an ear-splitting cockatoo, and a melancholy stork, upon whom the dogs were with difficulty restrained from falling. Many failures and a few successes ensued; it all took a long time; Miss Gardiner skipped about in the sunshine with her camera, while her subjects meekly endeavored to obey her instructions. Apparently she enjoyed that method of spending the afternoon, and Harold began to wonder when she was going to say the things to him which she had professed herself eager to say. At length Lady Gardiner announced that she had had enough of sitting for her portrait for one day.

"I have got to pay calls upon various natives," she remarked, "and the carriage must have been at the door for more than half an hour. I dare say you will both forgive me for leaving you."

As to their willingness to do that there could be small room for doubt; but Harold, after the old lady's leisurely retreat, felt bound to say:

"The question is whether you will forgive me for not

having left. I ought to have made myself scarce long ago, ought I not?"

"Why," asked Miss Gardiner, who was putting her camera back into its case, "do you ask such senseless questions? You know perfectly well—because I told you—that you came here to have a talk with me, not to be photographed, and if you have been kept waiting, so have I. Not that my mother is much given to interrupting; only it is always more comfortable to be sure that one has a sufficiency of time and space for one's purpose. You aren't in a hurry, I hope?"

"I am in no hurry to go away," he answered; "I am in rather a hurry to be talked to—although I believe I can guess what you are about to say. I have had the honor to interest you in my professional capacity, and you wish me to tell you how it is done. I have been asked that question a good many times, first and last; but unfortunately I can't reply, because I don't know."

"Oh, dear me! what a bad shot! I am neither so silly nor so inquisitive as you think. Besides, I am by no means sure that I admire you in your professional capacity. Your recitation, of course, was perfect; but you gave me to understand at the time that it was more or less of a fluke, and I can well believe that it was. What I should like to discover, if I could, is whether you are discontented or not. I hope you are, and I know you ought to be."

"Why ought I to be?" Harold asked.

"Because," answered Miss Gardiner, who had now conducted him into the tent and was reclining in a low chair at his elbow, "you have great abilities—some ob-

vious, others held in reserve for the present. Also because it does not accord with the fitness of things that a man of your pedigree and education should devote his whole future to the stage."

"But I thought you were a Radical," said Harold, who had certainly gathered as much from Miss Gardiner's remarks to one of her recent distinguished visitors.

"So I am, politically; but that doesn't imply that I believe in the social equality of all human beings, and I doubt whether anybody seriously holds such a ridiculous creed. Honestly, now—don't you feel that circumstances have been rather unkind to you, and that you are not quite in your proper place?"

Harold shook his head. "I can't see why the pursuit of any art should be considered derogatory," he declared; "it never has been considered so, except perhaps by snobs. Painters, sculptors, authors, musical composers—isn't it admitted that all these, provided that they are sufficiently eminent, rank with gentlemen?"

"I hardly think it is, unless they happen to be gentlemen by birth, as of course they may be. But actors are different."

"Why is the unhappy actor to be banned?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "A man who is liable at any moment to be hissed and hooted off the stage?—a man who plasters his face with grease and paint and capers before the public? But we won't waste time in arguing the question; for you know as well as I do that, although it is the fashion just now to make much of certain actors and actresses, nobody really looks upon them as belonging to the class to which you and I belong."

"Well, what then? Suppose I don't care?"

"I should be so horribly disappointed in you if you didn't care! But I am almost sure you do. I am almost sure that you are ambitious, and I can't think that your ambition would be satisfied even if you were to become the most famous actor in England."

Harold, on the contrary, was quite inclined to think that it would; yet he listened—at first with amusement, then with an increasing sense of satisfaction—to Miss Gardiner's description of what his ambitions would be were he what her fancy painted him. From this it appeared that, as the scion of an ancient and dispossessed family, he must above all things desire to restore the fallen fortunes of the race, to be once more Dunville of Dunville Manor, to make a name for himself which should not be unworthy of his illustrious origin. And he must be aware that he had the requisite capacity, given a field for its exercise; he could not but recognize that such successes as he had already achieved, however legitimate and creditable in themselves, were quite useless as a means toward his end. He must, therefore, be discontented with his actual circumstances, despite the outward courage and serenity with which he accepted them. As a likeness of Harold Dunville, this scarcely reached the level of the negatives which had just been taken in such profusion; but it was at least a rather attractive picture, and nobody objects to be pleasingly portrayed. Harold not only liked it, but found himself—as it was his custom and nature to do—involuntarily adopting the part assigned to him while his neighbor talked. She talked very

well, too, and with a perceptible enthusiasm which was at once flattering and infectious.

"Only you seem to have forgotten one thing," he remarked, when she paused; "I don't happen to be the head of my family."

"Oh, your brother doesn't count," she returned; "he virtually puts himself out of it by being a parson."

"Does he? Well, then, there is another thing. This place is let to tenants who, from what I can hear, are not unlikely to become purchasers."

"We scarcely count, either. I doubt whether my father will buy the place, and even if he should— However, these are mere details; the essential point is that you should really wish to recover what you have lost. And my conviction is that you do."

Upon what evidence had she arrived at such a conviction? He could not imagine; yet, oddly enough, he shared it. He confessed—and indeed this was true—that the thought of the home of his childhood being in the occupation of strangers had often pained him; he owned that he was sometimes disgusted by the unavoidable limitations and humiliations of a stage career; he professed, with all the pathos that the occasion demanded and even a little more, deep contrition for the juvenile excesses which had finally resulted in his being what he was.

"But," he pertinently asked, in conclusion, "in what way can a man of my age and my small opportunities make a fresh departure?"

She surprised him by replying, without a moment's hesitation: "There is only one way: you must get into Parliament."

"Never before," Harold answered, laughing, "have I heard that recommended as a method of making money. On the other hand, I know that it is impossible to get into Parliament without spending money; and I am a pauper."

"Surely you must have saved something!"

"Well, a few thousands."

"A few thousands would suffice. And I think you are mistaken in supposing that political life doesn't lead to fortune. Very often it does. Of course I am not speaking of the average M. P., who is a mere lay figure, but of men like yourself, who have the gift of eloquence and can force their way to the front if they choose. Moreover, money is not everything."

"Isn't it the main thing?"

"Certainly not; distinction is the main thing, and distinction is what I want you to secure. The rest will follow."

"I can't think in what way."

"Oh, well, you will see. Practically, it always does follow through one channel or another, and nothing venture nothing have. Now, I happen to know—but this is strictly private—that the representation of the division in which we live will soon be vacant. Poor Mr. Pemberton, who is almost hopelessly ill, must resign his seat before long, and you, as a local man, ought to have a very good chance of succeeding him. Particularly as you would be backed by my father's influence, which may not amount to much locally, but is powerful at headquarters. When once you have been returned as member for the division you will have got your foot firmly upon the first

rung of the ladder which will lead up to—well, to all manner of fine things, I hope."

"You take my breath away!" exclaimed Harold.

"Yes; I thought very likely I should. But you will get it back again presently—to-morrow or the day after, shall we say?—and then perhaps you will let me know whether or not we are to enter into an alliance which I trust that you will never have reason to regret, if you decide to conclude it. You see, it just comes to this: the stage will never do, whereas public life may do, and, with your talents, probably will. There is the risk of failure, I grant you; but since the world began nothing great has ever been accomplished by people who shrank from that risk."

She continued in the same strain for some little time longer, and he fell in with her mood, partly because he was genuinely influenced by it, partly because his temperament forbade him to decline a becoming *rôle*. It was scarcely possible for him to close his eyes to what he was really being offered, nor could Miss Gardiner very well have avowed her personal desires with greater frankness. Such, at all events, was his conclusion, as he walked homeward, and he dallied for a while, not unappreciatively, with the idea of espousing Sir Joseph's heiress. In that way, no doubt, a Dunville might once more come into his own. For the rest, her notions were fantastic enough, and she was so evidently capricious that they were as likely as not to prove evanescent. Then, too, there was Lilian.

"Oh, I sha'n't do it," he said to himself at length; "of course I sha'n't dream of doing it. I dare say I

should have dreamed of doing it, though, if I had come across her a few months ago; for it all sounds rather nice."

Anne, when he reached the rectory grounds, had something to tell him which did not sound at all nice. He encountered her in the orchard, which he was traversing on his way to the house, and she said:

"You have missed a visit from Lilian Ormond by paying such an unconscionably long one to the Gardiners. She and Dick went away together on their bicycles about half an hour ago."

She had the satisfaction of seeing Harold's face fall; but he did not give her that of hearing him express verbal disappointment. His only remark was:

"Unfortunately, one can't be in two places at the same time, and I was detained longer than I had expected."

"By Lady Gardiner?"

"No; my departure would never leave the old lady inconsolable, I am afraid. It was Miss Gardiner who first wanted to take my photograph and then to tell my fortune."

"O-ho!" said Anne, pricking up her ears; "so Josephine wanted to tell your fortune, did she? Through examination of the palm of your hand or through intuitive perception?"

"Of course she didn't examine my hand. That game has been out of fashion for a great many years, and Miss Gardiner is not the sort of person to take up discarded fashions. She only wished to convince me—and pretty nearly succeeded in convincing me—that I am thrown

away upon the stage. After all, it *is* in some ways an undignified calling and one might do better for oneself in other directions. What do you think? "

He was honestly desirous of hearing what a sensible person like Anne thought, and he was only a little disconcerted by the promptitude and candor of her reply.

" No doubt," said she, " you would do a great deal better for yourself in a worldly sense by marrying Josephine Gardiner, if that is what you and she mean. And, taking all the circumstances into consideration, you can't very well mean anything else. Don't count upon her, though; don't drop the bone that you have in your mouth before you are sure of being able to snap up a bigger one. It is disinterested of me to give you this advice, because nothing would please me more personally than to see you making love to Josephine. In fact, I would gladly see you making love to anybody who wasn't Lilian Ormond."

" I wonder why! "

" You wouldn't wonder if you had eyes in your head and intelligence enough to use them. I don't suppose there is much use in my telling you; but perhaps there isn't any great harm either. It is a question between you and Dick, that's all."

" You don't mean that! "

" I always mean what I say. And, although you are unlikely to believe me, she is really not very far from being in love with Dick—or was not before you came and put your oar in. Unquestionably she is very fond of him."

" I should be surprised if she were not," Harold generously declared.

" And even more surprised if she were to accept him, I dare say. Well, she won't do that this afternoon, for the good reason that she won't be asked; but I hope poor Dick is having a pleasant time. Now, I know very well that there is no surer way of making a pig turn to the left than shooing him off toward the right; but, for all that, I can't help waving my elderly arms and stamping my ancient feet behind you. Especially now that you are provided with such a splendid counter-attraction. Dick is too chivalrous to say a word and too much of a gentleman to bear malice, happen what may. Don't you think that you might imitate his chivalry to the extent of remembering that he was first in the field and that he at least is in earnest? "

Harold was spared the necessity of reply to an appeal so direct and so extremely embarrassing by the entrance of his elder brother in person, and this interruption was the more welcome to him because he really could not regard Dick in the light of an imaginable rival. Dick was at the moment unbecomingly hot; also he looked every year of his age; also he wanted his tea, and devoured buttered toast, when it was brought to him, in a most unromantic fashion. Oh, no! the whole thing must be a delusion of Anne's, born of a desire on her part that matters should arrange themselves as she wanted them to do. Nevertheless, it was distinctly alarming to be requested, after a time, to accompany Dick into his study.

" Could you spare me half an hour? " the latter asked, with some hesitation and diffidence. " I want, if

you don't mind, to talk to you about something in private."

So it was coming, after all! Harold jumped up, with apparent alacrity, but with a sinking heart and a resentful feeling that his hand was being forced. It would be so easy to drive him into a corner, to make him say plainly whether he meant business or not. And he was, for various reasons, so very disinclined to commit himself to a definite statement upon the subject! One thing, however, was certain: he could not now decline to be interrogated.

CHAPTER VIII

DREAMS AND DOUBTS

WHEN the two brothers had seated themselves in the little dark study which had been the scene of more mental activity than one of them suspected, the elder filled and lighted his pipe, while the younger drew a cigarette out of a resplendent gold case, adorned with a monogram in brilliants—the gift of Miss Lorna Fitzwalter.

"I am afraid," Dick began, with an embarrassed laugh, "that I am going to make you think me rather a fool; but that can't be helped. There are things which have got to be confessed sooner or later, I take it, whatever the consequences may be."

A grunt, which partook of the nature of a groan, signified resigned acquiescence on Harold's part. His personal opinion was that it is always easy and generally wise to refrain from confessions; but of course there is no stopping people who are bent upon disburdening their souls.

"I suppose," Dick went on, meditatively, "that we must be a good deal alike in some ways, you and I. Your abilities, no doubt, are superior to mine; still there may be—there appears to be—something in the blood which causes us to have the same tendencies, the same inclina-

tions, the same overpowering cravings. For my own part, anyhow, I may say that I have been more or less conscious of this all my life."

All his life! Well, he certainly could not have been conscious of being in love with Lilian Ormond before she was born, and Harold was unable to recall earlier instances of their having set their affections on a common object. He said, in accents of mild remonstrance, "Isn't that rather fanciful?"

"Possibly," answered Dick, "and indeed I don't know that there has ever been an actor or an actress or a dramatic author in our family. All I do know is that the theater has always had an extraordinary attraction for me, and that I have always felt—quite mistakenly, I dare say—that I could write a passable play if I tried."

Harold was so relieved that he could not help ejaculating. "Oh! is that all?"

"No, that isn't all; I have actually done it! I have written the play; about which I want you to give me your honest opinion. I have read it and written it too often to have any opinion of my own, and it has been locked up in one of my drawers for the last two years. Of course, while dear mother lived I couldn't horrify her—as I assuredly should have done—by producing it; but now I feel free. For, although it is not usual for the clergy to write plays, I see no moral objection in the world to their doing so, and indeed, as far as that goes, my name need not appear upon the play-bill."

Harold contrived to keep his face straight, notwithstanding a sudden spasm of inward laughter, which was provoked by various causes. Only to one of these did he

give expression when he mildly remarked: "It is a longish step from writing a play to printing a play-bill, you know."

"Oh, the thing may be worthless and hopeless; I shall not be in the least surprised if you tell me that it is," Dick answered. "I won't deny that I shall be disappointed; for I want money, and successful pieces are lucrative, I believe."

"Very lucrative indeed. A man of my acquaintance has lately made over thirty thousand pounds by a play —and a rather poor play, too."

"Is it possible? And does that happen often?"

"No; but there are dramatists who have done even better with a single production, and from five to ten thousand pounds is no very out-of-the-way profit to make. However, the whole business is a lottery; the most experienced judges can't tell beforehand what will hit the target of public favor or what will miss it. The great difficulty in the way of beginners is that managers are so shy of experiments. They would much rather bring out a bad play by an old hand than one which looks as if it might be a good play by a novice. As for me, I can't pretend to be an experienced judge, and I have no more influence with managers than you have."

These well-meant admonitory remarks did not appear to have much discouraging effect upon Dick, who in truth was only listening to them with one ear.

"Thirty thousand pounds!" he murmured. "Why, at that rate one might be a rich man in no time!"

"It takes a little time to collect the money," said Harold, smiling. "I thought you were rather by way of

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despising wealth, Dick; why are you in such a desperate hurry to become rich?"

Dick did not make the reply which the other's half-jealous suspicion had anticipated; but the reply that he did make was of a nature to excite a different order of jealousy. He strode up and down the room, with his hands under his coat-tails, while he jerked out alternate clouds of smoke and apologetic sentences.

"Oh, well, one has dreams; I suppose everybody has dreams. Foolish, perhaps; but innocent, I hope. When I succeeded to the property there was obviously only one thing to be done, and I did it. At the same time, it was a wrench. Naturally, I don't much like to see strangers in the old place; I dare say you don't like it yourself."

"Not much."

"And perhaps we should both dislike even more to see them owners instead of tenants; although, if Sir Joseph offered a good price it might be almost a matter of duty to accept it."

"How a matter of duty?" Harold asked, quickly. "In the sense that you may have a wife and family to provide for before long, do you mean?"

Dick's clear eyes met his brother's questioning look with one which seemed to be also partially interrogative, but which had not the faintest trace of reproach.

"I don't think that contingency is particularly likely to arise," he answered; "but, as practical men, we had better take it into account. Well, then, as I say, I have had my dreams. Not, indeed, of being able to live at the manor again—which even such sums as you mention

would scarcely put it in my power to do—but at least of keeping what remains of the estate in the family."

"I think that, if by any possible means it can be kept in the family, it ought to be kept," said Harold, gravely and decidedly.

He was for the moment quite gravely, quite decidedly of that opinion. If he was not in reality what Josephine Gardiner took him for, she had succeeded in making him believe that he was—had succeeded also in convincing him that, as she said, the stage would "never do." To retain the old home for the old family was an ambition so noble and becoming that he could not refuse himself the credit of cherishing it, even though he perceived that it might demand some heavy sacrifices; but that the object in view should be achieved by Dick, with his fantastic notions of making a fortune by play-writing, was as little imaginable as it was desirable. Presently, as his brother did not speak, he resumed:

"I, too, have sometimes permitted myself to dream. It wasn't I who wrecked our fortunes; still I certainly gave them a kick on the downward path, and if I should ever be able to get the manor back, it would be a species of atonement on my part, wouldn't it?"

"You would have to make a large sum of money," remarked Dick, dubiously. "Do you think it could be done out of your earnings as an actor or a manager?"

"It might; one never knows. And other ways of making money are not inconceivable. However, there isn't much use in talking about dreams until one has taken a step or two toward converting them into matters of fact."

"Meanwhile, you'll read my humble bid for fortune in the capacity of a playwright?"

Of course, he would do that, Harold promised, adding, as a kindly forewarning of probable disappointment, that a man might be an extremely clever fellow, and even an admirable writer, without possessing the peculiar dramatic instinct. In truth, nothing seemed to him less likely than that his brother had that instinct, and he felt but a very faint curiosity to peruse the neatly written manuscript which was now handed to him.

Before midnight, however, he was wonderingly compelled to alter his opinion of Dick's capacity. Retiring, as usual, at a comparatively early hour, and not feeling sleepy when he reached his bedroom, he thought he would just take a look at what was tolerably certain to prove an impossible piece, and, after perusing a few pages, he had to recognize that it did not promise to be at all impossible. At the end of the first act he exclaimed aloud, "But, hang it all, you know, this is devilish good!" In the second and third acts the interest grew, culminating, as always ought to be and so seldom is the case, in the fourth; so that, when Harold at length laid down the manuscript, he was fain to mutter:

"The only question is whether the thing isn't *too* good! The only question is whether there is a single actor in this country who could play the principal part without spoiling it."

Perhaps there was one; but that one, unfortunately, was thinking of abandoning the stage in favor of political life and other contingent avocations. He stretched out his arms and legs, laughed, and mused: "Well, there's

Moore. He wouldn't do it anything like as convincingly as I should, for he would never realize all that there is to be done with it. Still, I dare say he would score a success, and it's essentially a one-part piece, which is what he prefers. Lord! how I shall hate giving it up to him! One must needs give up something, though, if one wants to secure something better."

This profound philosophical reflection gave rise to others, which kept him out of his bed for the best part of an hour. He was proposing to surrender, or, at all events, contemplating the surrender of, more than a stage triumph, and it seemed very doubtful indeed whether he was not about to lay up a lifelong regret for himself. Had he been younger, he would have felt no doubt at all upon the subject; but experience had inevitably taught him self-knowledge, and, although he wanted to believe that he would always love Lilian Ormond, he could not but be aware that it would be a sheer miracle if he should. On the other hand, his highly precarious and imaginative scheme might come to nothing, while there was a very fair probability of Dick's play bringing its author a pot of money. Not enough, to be sure, for the redemption of the property; yet enough, perhaps, to warrant an offer of marriage which, according to Anne, was by no means sure to be declined.

"Oh, I couldn't stand that!" he cried.

The disinterested Anne had recommended him not to drop the bone that he had already in his mouth, and her words, with a somewhat different application from that which she had intended them to bear, remained surely words of wisdom. "All for love, and the world well

lost!" Harold ejaculated. Not that there was any question of losing the world—only of relinquishing a vague and rather fantastic vision. So before he went to sleep he ungallantly commended Miss Josephine Gardiner and the House of Commons to the deuce.

There can be no need to add that he went over to Beechwood the next day; nor was he disappointed of the private conversation with Lilian for which he was impatient. Her brothers, together with sundry scions of neighboring families who were at home for the holidays or the long vacation, were engaged upon a cricket-match in the park, at which the pair looked on for a time; then they strolled off to the adjoining woods, and Harold was enabled to mention, with a hint of reproach in his voice, how desperately dreary existence during the past few days had been rendered for him by his companion's absence.

"In spite of Lady Gardiner and Josephine?" asked the girl, laughing. "I really can't believe that you found their company dreary. Anyhow, you seemed to have liked it well enough to spend the whole of yesterday afternoon with them, instead of coming home to tea with your sister and me."

"How was I to know that you were coming to tea? I tore my hair when I heard that you had been and gone. As for the Gardiners, I couldn't very well refuse their invitation. That is the worst of being in the country, where everybody knows whether it is possible for one to be engaged or not."

"All the same, I doubt whether you would have accepted if you hadn't wanted to accept. But why

shouldn't you want to cultivate Josephine's acquaintance? It would be strange if you were not interested in her, for nobody can deny that she is an interesting person."

"I suppose she is. Rather odd, rather clever—oh, yes, as far as that goes, I dare say I should have been interested in her talk if I hadn't wanted so much to be somewhere else all the time."

Lilian laughed again, and remarked: "If Josephine could hear you, she would hardly believe her ears. I should think it must be a rule almost without an exception that people who are with her never want to be anywhere else."

Evidently she was not jealous of Miss Gardiner, and he scarcely knew whether to be pleased or not by her immunity from a very comprehensible weakness. Either she felt sure of him or she cared less about him than he had fondly imagined: which was it? In any case, it was not so much with regard to Josephine as to another person that he was anxious to arrive at her sentiments; so, after remaining silent for a moment, he changed the subject by remarking:

"What a good fellow that brother of mine is!"

"As good as it is possible to be," Lilian cordially agreed. "But have you only just made that discovery?"

"Well, I am renewing it. You must remember that I have seen nothing of him for ages, and that I probably don't know him half as well as you do."

"The more you see of him the more you will like and admire him," Lilian confidently declared.

"Oh!—has that been your experience?"

"Yes; and I am sure that it will go on being my experience. One never gets to the end of his goodness. Of course, everybody has faults; but what his are I can't think, unless being too modest and underrating oneself is a fault. He certainly does that."

Perhaps, thought Harold, Dick did underrate himself in more ways than one; perhaps, too, somebody who was not given to that form of folly might have fallen into the opposite error. But this hypothesis was so disagreeable to contemplate that he could not help exclaiming, with a sigh:

"How happy I should be if I could hope that you would ever speak of me in such flattering language!"

She shook her head. "You will have to change a good deal if you are going to be like your brother. You are not the least bit like him now. But," she made haste to add, "I am not sure that I want you to be like him."

"Oh, from the moment that you don't want me to resemble Dick I have no temptation to strive after the impossible."

She turned her face toward him with an expression which could scarcely be misinterpreted. "It isn't perfection that one expects or asks for," said she; "do you think so?"

"I hope it isn't," he replied, "for you appear to have found out that I am far from perfect, and indeed I don't set up to be."

"No," she returned, smiling, "I know you don't, and I like you all the better for that. Such as you are, I wouldn't have you altered."

Upon this he suddenly cooled. He had ascertained

what it had been his object to ascertain; he was no longer afraid of Dick, only a little of himself and his own impetuosity. One step farther upon that very thin ice and all would be over! He said to himself, as he had had to say on many previous occasions, "For heaven's sake, mind what you are about!" So, instead of clasping the girl whom he loved in his arms—which thing he well knew that he might do safely in one sense, however perilously in another—he began to discourse, after a somewhat vague, confused fashion, of the duties which seemed to impose themselves upon a man placed as he was. There was, for example, the chance that, by dint of some exertion on his part, a portion of the alienated family estates might be redeemed. One thought more than one talked about such things, he said; one's conduct and one's projects were liable to be influenced by them—ought to be influenced by them perhaps.

She agreed and sympathized. It was obvious that she did not understand what he was driving at, and he had neither the face nor the heart to be more explicit. Moreover, he himself recognized but uncertainly and unwillingly what his drift was. All he did know for certain was that he loved Lilian, and that he could have wished her to count upon his devotion with just a shade less of assurance than she did.

The sudden advent of Mr. Ormond was not unwelcome to him, as relieving a situation which threatened to become complicated. Mr. Ormond, whose puckered brow and pursed-up lips denoted inward perturbation, had not come to interrupt the *tête-à-tête* in the character of a vigilant parent (for. as has been mentioned, he appar-

ently thought that his daughter required no looking after), but because he wanted to tell somebody about a very annoying piece of news which had just reached him, and because the spectators of the cricket-match furnished a rather larger audience than he could discreetly address. He said:

"I don't know when in all my life I have been more vexed! It has been only too plain to us all of late that poor Pemberton was in a bad way; but I did hope that his health would have allowed him to represent the division for one more session—which might have made all the difference. Now, however, I hear from a sure source that he has made up his mind to retire almost immediately. Of course, one can't blame him—the doctor's orders are imperative, I understand—still, the fact remains that he is simply making a present of the seat to the Radicals."

"How dreadfully unfortunate!" exclaimed Lilian. "But, after all, Mr. Pemberton had a fair majority at the last election, hadn't he? Why should we despair?"

"Because of your infernal friends at the manor, for one thing," growled her father in reply. "That old rascal Gardiner has been spending any amount of money in the neighborhood, and it's easy to guess his motives. Besides, there are other reasons which you wouldn't understand for our being most unfavorably situated as regards the electorate at the present moment. A Conservative county, too, except in our own confounded district. Oh, we shall disgrace ourselves; you may take my word for it that we shall disgrace ourselves!"

Lilian hoped not, and was politely told for her pains

that the voters were not particularly likely to be influenced by her hopes. Harold confined himself to remarking that he presumed there would be a contest.

"Naturally there will," returned the old gentleman, irritably. "You don't suppose that we are going to let some brute of a carpetbagger walk over, do you? But we shall be beaten, you'll see. Ah, dear me! What a sad pity it is that the old families, like your own, are either turned out of house and home or too poor to come forward! We ourselves shall have to fall back upon a carpetbagger, I fear."

What would he have thought and said had it been revealed to him that one representative of the local old families had already been solicited to come forward in the Radical interest? Harold, of course, made no such appalling revelation in the course of the long harangue to which he now lent a respectful ear; yet, after taking his leave, he could not help indulging in visions which were at least seductive so long as they remained within the realm of visions. An easy victory and a rich reward! That much seemed virtually promised to him; and if there be no rose without a thorn, who can doubt that it is sometimes worth while to be stabbed by a thorn in order to pluck a rose? Nevertheless, he concluded, as he had done before, by muttering, "Oh, I sha'n't do it—I can't do it! I almost wish I could, though."

CHAPTER IX

RENUNCIATION, FICTITIOUS AND OTHER

"WELL," said Dick, with ill-suppressed eagerness, when the two brothers were having their accustomed smoke together that evening, "of course you haven't looked at Renunciation yet."

Harold laughed. "Of course I have read it all through, and of course I am delighted with it. Amazed, too, if you'll excuse me for saying so. I didn't give you credit for so much knowledge of this wicked world."

"I know nothing of the world," the clerical dramatist declared, while a gratified flush overspread his cheeks; "perhaps, as a parson, I may claim to know a little about human nature."

They all make the same claim, poor fellows, upon the same rather comically inadequate ground: it is, after all, natural enough that they should generalize from their limited opportunities of getting at the truth. The rector of Dunville, however, aided by a singularly straightforward character and a good stock of common sense, was, despite his calling, no very bad judge of mankind. He went on:

"You encourage me more than I had dared to hope."

"Oh, you mustn't be too much encouraged," Harold cautioned him; "I'm far from infallible. Don't be dis-

couraged, either, though; the play, when once it has been made into a play, ought, I should say, to have more than a fair chance of success."

"You don't call it a play as it stands, then?"

"No; it wouldn't act as it stands; it will want a lot of cutting and revision and general knocking into shape. But that is merely technical business; the real difficulty—practically the only one—will be to find a manager willing to accept it. Managers, you see, are apt to be timorous and conservative; they have a strong prejudice in favor of old hands and a deep distrust of beginners. Also, there will be another difficulty, perhaps not quite so great, in discovering an interpreter for the principal part."

"So far as I had any hope connected with the matter," Dick began, "I was hoping——"

"Oh, yes, I know you were," his junior smilingly interrupted; "that seemed to stare one in the face all through, and I couldn't for the life of me help agreeing with you. Frankly, I should enjoy doing it if I were my own master; but for many reasons, and in many ways, I'm not. What I would suggest is that you should allow me to pull your work to bits and piece it together again with the help of my professional experience, which is worth something. Then I would show the result to Shepherd and take his opinion, which is worth a great deal more than mine. If he decides that it won't do for us, he may yet quite probably be able to place it with somebody else, for he knows every actor and manager in London."

This good-natured offer was, it is needless to say,

gratefully accepted. Harold was in truth good-natured, and if for a moment something akin to jealousy of his elder brother had touched him, he felt nothing of the sort now. Presently he remarked:

"Even if your play is put upon the stage and succeeds, you mustn't, I am afraid, expect to make your fortune by it."

"You spoke of five or ten thousand pounds," said Dick.

"With a genuine hit, and including all subsequent provincial and possibly American earnings—yes. That, however, hardly represents the price of the ancestral abode, does it?"

"Oh, dear, no! I shall never myself inhabit the old place; my ambition stops a long way short of that. But every little helps, and I suppose that if I can write a successful play, I can write half a dozen in time."

"And perhaps support a wife upon your literary earnings as you go on?" suggested Harold, to see what he would say to that.

What he said was, "Oh, as I told you before, I don't look upon matrimony as a probable event for me."

"I wonder at that," Harold declared; "I should have thought it was in the natural order of things that you should marry, and there are spinsters in the neighborhood at whom you ought hardly to turn up your nose. A neighborhood which can boast of Miss Ormond, for one!"

"Do you think," asked Dick, looking him quietly in the face, "that Lilian Ormond would take me if I were to ask her?"

"How can I tell?" Harold valiantly returned, though he looked a little confused. "I know nothing about it."

Upon this his elder brother clapped him smartly on the shoulder and laughed. "My dear fellow, I suspect that you know enough about it to preserve you from talking rubbish. Now I'm off to bed."

In solitude Harold finished his cigar, moved, grateful, even a trifle repentant. He was, as a certain critic of drama had irritated him by stating in print, a gentleman, and this compelled him to acknowledge that his elder brother was rather more of a gentleman than he. But what is one to do in such cases? He could not make Lilian Ormond fall in love with his elder brother, nor could the most high-flown notions of chivalry demand self-sacrifice of him to that extent. Nevertheless, a much less exalted standard of chivalry seemed to put forward other demands, and the worst of it was that he could not quite make up his mind to comply with these. The rough world had perhaps rubbed some of the bloom off him; life and experience had, at all events, taught him some lessons to which, at a pinch, his eyes invariably opened themselves, and although he loved Lilian, his strong inclination was to stop just short of telling her so. There was a romantic side to him and a practical side; it was like being on or off the stage, he sometimes thought. If he found it difficult to recognize his real self, this failure on his part to accomplish a feat which very few of us manage to accomplish under conditions not so bewildering was scarcely to be wondered at.

Lilian, in the course of the next few days, not only

gave him no help toward decision, but played her cards (or rather would have played them, had she been aware of being engaged in a game of skill) as badly as possible. Her heart was his, she could no longer doubt that his was hers, and those who like to laugh at her for attributing his reticence to timidity must be allowed to have their laugh. By her way of thinking, he might easily have reasons for fearing to speak out; his past was a little against him, his present calling might, in the eyes of some old-fashioned persons, like her father, be a little against him, and it was a good deal his habit to allude to these things. Consequently she did precisely what she ought not to have done, and scared him by creating opportunities. More than once, during their frequent undisturbed colloquies, he was upon the verge of throwing prudence to the winds; more than once she put a seal upon his lips by divining what was in his mind and letting him see that she divined it. Josephine, meanwhile, made no sign. It was doubtless for a sign from Josephine that he was, consciously or unconsciously, waiting all the time.

This came at length in the shape of a note from one who, for her part, was a fairly skilful card-player. Miss Gardiner wrote to say how sorry she was that a lot of bothering visitors had kept her wearisomely employed "for the last ever so long," but that she was now at liberty and that she hoped her correspondent would come out for a ride with her on the morrow. He could ride, she presumed? Anyhow, the horse that he would find ready saddled for him in the stables at three o'clock had the sobriety of all the judges and bishops in the United Kingdom combined, so that there wouldn't be any riding to do.

"And I want rather particularly to resume a discussion which you will remember that we left in the air," she concluded.

He remembered very well at what point the discussion referred to had been broken off, and of course he walked across to the manor at the appointed hour on the following afternoon, despite the fact that he was no more ready now than he had been then to assume a definite attitude. He was, however, pleasantly excited, pleasantly curious to hear anything fresh that the temptress might have to urge upon him. He found her already mounted, and he could not but notice how well she looked on horseback. As a matter of fact, hers was a neat figure, while she had inherited something of her mother's former love and capability for equestrian exercise.

"Are you inclined for a gallop?" she asked. "I am, and so are the horses. Suppose we make for the common and take it out of ourselves and them for a quarter of an hour? It isn't a bit too hot, luckily, and a breather to start with will pave the way for quiet and serious conversation."

The common to which she alluded was a wide stretch of gorse-covered, unenclosed land, adjoining the park, which had, in bygone days, been utilized by many a sporting Dunville as a training-ground for steeplechasers. Miss Gardiner, as Harold soon perceived after she had given her mount his head, was no very finished horsewoman; still, she sat close to her saddle, she flew a couple of banks without hesitation, she was evidently plucky, if her courage was only that of ignorance, and the fresh breeze brought a becoming color into her cheeks. By the

time that she drew rein, her companion had already fallen a little under her spell, although she had scarcely uttered a word. She diffused about her—as in truth she always did more or less—a certain atmosphere of recklessness and adventure which was not unattractive and to which her speech presently fitted itself.

"Well," she asked, "have you tossed up yet?"

"Tossed up?" he echoed, interrogatively.

"It comes to that, doesn't it? Heads or tails?—actor or politician? There's no saying for certain which it ought to be; so luck must decide."

"I thought you were quite certain which it ought to be," remarked Harold.

"So I am; but you aren't. Otherwise I should have heard from you before this."

"Perhaps you would, and perhaps I am wavering. Anyhow, let us assume that I am, for the sake of the quiet and serious conversation which you promised me just now."

"I think," said Miss Gardiner, consideringly, "that the time has come for you to stop wavering. In fact, I may say that I know it has; for there is very little time left to lose. Decide this afternoon, and I believe you will be returned as Mr. Pemberton's successor, because in that case my father will do what he can for you, which means a good deal. Personally, I am not much given to wavering, and I am most anxious that you should make your choice in favor of public life; yet I don't care to assume sole responsibility in matters which are beyond my control. You see, you may fail, and if you do, that will be your fault, not mine, remember."

"Do you know," returned Harold, "it strikes me that without your assistance I am absolutely bound to fail."

"Oh, you'll have my assistance. That is, provided that you go in for the thing whole-heartedly and with a firm determination to win."

"To win what?" he asked, with a side glance which gave a somewhat wider scope to the question than his tongue was ready to formulate.

She laughed. "*Qui vivra verra;* you don't expect to be Prime Minister to-morrow or even the day after, I suppose. What you and I know—or at least what I know and you ought to know—is that you do possess what is indispensable for victory. Relative helps will probably be added unto you. By me, at all events, if by nobody else."

If this was not plain-speaking, it was surely as near an approach to plain-speaking as could be risked! No more than he could expect to become immediately Prime Minister could she offer him her hand and her fortune as stepping-stones toward that eminent office; but, seeing that she was aware of his pecuniary position, did not her words virtually imply such an offer? And then, as though to make an end of any lingering hesitation on his part, she professed to read his thoughts—thoughts which were in truth in his mind, only waiting to be crystalized into shape by the influence which she had somehow established over him.

"You would like to plead that you have had other ideas. I won't call them ambitions, because they are hardly worthy of being dignified by that name; still, they

may have endeared themselves to you, and you shrink a little from throwing them overboard. Overboard they must go, though, or you will never rise above your present level, with which it isn't possible that you, being what you are, can be contented—never be Dunville of Dunville Manor, never do anything to the end of your days but skip about the stage to an accompaniment of vacuous laughter or foolish tears. Doesn't it sometimes occur to you that a comedian is a rather despicable being?"

"Few things occur to me more frequently or more forcibly."

"Then I needn't any further disparage your profession, which is a decent and suitable one enough, I dare say, for some folk. You see that it isn't suitable for you and that the ideas which you will have to discard are equally unsuitable; I ask no more of you for the present."

The ideas which he would have to discard! It was an odd way of describing love, honor, and loyalty, if those were the encumbrances to which she so lightly alluded; but no doubt he must either renounce them or Miss Gardiner, with her alluring plan of campaign. It can not be said that he seriously debated the question; the demands of a given situation were for him so invariably and inevitably of an artistic order that it was really beyond him to spoil this one by a stupid *non possumus*. He postponed surrender, however, for a moment with the remark that his had from time immemorial been a Tory family.

"Bless your soul!" returned his companion, "that will only add a piquant flavor to your candidature. In

reality there aren't any more Tories; party government is a mere phantom, to which we should no longer cling if we were not such a conservative nation that we hate parting with time-honored names and shadows, and your coming forward as a Radical means no more than that you advocate certain measures which one ministry or another is bound to introduce eventually. Your object in entering Parliament is to distinguish yourself personally, and it so happens that our side can offer you a far better chance now than the opposite one, which has too comfortable a majority to be crying out for distinguished recruits."

"Are you sure," asked Harold, "that my object in entering Parliament, if I am returned, will be to distinguish myself?"

"Well, *my* object, anyhow, is that you should."

"Ah!—I am afraid mine will only be to give you what you flatter me by calling yours."

He accompanied this graceful act of submission by an act of audacity which did not seem likely to be resented. They were riding so close together that it was easy for him to raise her gloved hand to his lips and almost—according to his notions of what is always expected by her sex—obligatory upon him to do so. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that he would have deferred thus respectfully paying homage to Miss Gardiner's charms had he, in time to stop himself, caught sight of a couple of pedestrians who at that moment emerged from behind a thicket and paused just in front of the horses' heads. That Dick and Lilian Ormond, discussing parochial affairs and bent upon some errand of parochial charity, should chance to

be crossing the common at a juncture so apparently critical was indeed a striking instance of the impishness of destiny! All the four persons concerned, however, kept their heads and their countenances in a manner which did them credit. Greetings were exchanged, the weather was duly commented upon, Dick said something approving about the condition of the horses, and Josephine hoped that Lilian meant to patronize "the horrid garden squash" at the manor next week.

"Your people, I know, wouldn't be seen in such company; but we count upon you to represent them under protest."

A somewhat awkward encounter passed off without visible awkwardness; but Miss Gardiner, as soon as she and her attendant cavalier were out of earshot, broke into a laugh.

"Teach you to display stage manners off the stage!" she remarked. "But the fact is that you really do require a few lessons."

It may be that Lilian Ormond also stood in some need of a lesson; but Dick, pacing by her side, with a heart too full of regret and sympathy and indignation for speech, was left in some doubt as to whether she had received one or not; for her only observation upon what they had witnessed was:

"I wonder what Josephine could have been saying to your brother to make him kiss her hand. She says such extraordinary things sometimes!"

"That," Dick could not help rejoining, "doesn't seem to me to explain or excuse his doing extraordinary things."

"Oh, but don't you think," asked the girl, with a laugh which sounded quite natural and betrayed no mortification, "that he generally does what he is invited to do?"

"If you mean that it is his nature to be careless and complaisant," grunted Dick, "I dare say it is. Such natures are rather dangerous, though—both to those who are blessed or afflicted with them and to others."

But his own loyal nature caused him at once to be ashamed of disparaging the absent, and he hastened to resume: "Very likely Harold couldn't help himself; very likely that demonstration was the most ordinary thing in the world and implied nothing. I know so little of modern society and its ways of going on."

"I don't think it implied much," said Lilian, placidly.

Did she, perhaps, already know that it could not have implied much?—or was she assuming more than it was for her peace of mind to assume? Dick could neither tell nor inquire; the one thing obvious to him (but indeed this was no fresh discovery) was that the girl whom he secretly loved belonged in heart to his younger brother. Just because he loved her, and because he was sore and apprehensive, it was out of the question for him to put her upon her guard against his younger brother. Because, moreover, he was conscious that he himself must be upon his guard against injustice he went on:

"Anyhow, it is not for me to say a word against Harold's complaisance; for I have great hopes that I may be going to profit by it. Shall I let you into a profound secret?"

"Yes, please," answered Lilian, smiling; "you know that any secret of yours is safe with me, and you know how delighted I shall be to hear of anything that is likely to turn out to your advantage."

Oh, yes, he knew all that! He knew that she was fond of him, and he also knew that, if she had been fond of him after a tenderer fashion, she would have been less frank in her assurances of regard. But all his life long he had had to make the best of a back seat, and a back seat, as he had often tried to persuade himself, is better than none. So he told her about his play, and was rewarded by her ready sympathy and interest.

"It is certain to be a success!" she unhesitatingly declared.

"Oh, well, I don't know so much about that," answered the modest author. "Harold thinks well of it; but he says it will require extensive demolition and reconstruction. He is very good-naturedly going to undertake the job for me, and I dare say when he has done with it, the work will be almost as much his as mine. I think, indeed, that I must ask him to father it for me; my name, with its reverend prefix, could hardly be advertised as that of a playwright, you see."

"And if it does succeed, will you make a lot of money by it?"

"So he seems to anticipate. Provided, of course, that a really popular success is secured. In that case, I suppose, the profit will be mine, though the credit will be very deservedly his."

"He will never claim any credit that doesn't belong to him!" said Lilian, quickly.

"I don't for one moment mean to insinuate that he will. But the credit of remodeling the piece will belong to him, and if he makes himself responsible for the authorship, as I hope he will—— "

"But of course he won't," interrupted the girl, rather impatiently; "it would be easy enough, surely, to produce the play under an assumed name! Your brother, at all events, couldn't accept such an equivocal position. This is not among the things that he could do because he was invited to do them."

"I don't see that," returned Dick, musingly; "why shouldn't he? "

Lilian laughed. "That it should be for you to ask such a question, and for me to answer it! Well, only because he happens to be an honorable man."

At that self-same moment Harold, seated beside Miss Gardiner's tea-table, with his elbows on his knees, was making certain fervent replies to certain leading speeches of hers. Yet he really believed himself to be an honorable man, really believed that women must needs be humored, and that every earthly situation has its unavoidable exigencies. He had already, for example, gone the length of stating in so many words that Josephine's will would thenceforward be his will.

CHAPTER X

CUTTING THE PAINTER

THE rector of Dunville was not quite like himself at dinner that evening; his silence and evident preoccupation were not slow to attract the notice of his sister, and might also have been observed by his brother had not the latter been himself a little preoccupied. Conversation flagged until Anne, whose wise rule it was never to ask questions until there was a reasonable probability of receiving intelligible replies, retired for the night; but no sooner had she done so than Dick, less circumspect than she, blurted out:

"I say, what were you and Miss Gardiner about when we came upon you this afternoon on the common?"

"Let me see," answered Harold, with a countenance devoid of guile. "As far as I can remember we had been discussing my future career, and I was just thanking her for the kind interest that she seemed to take in it."

"H'm!—do you generally kiss people when you thank them?"

"Oh, no; very seldom, indeed. But I sometimes kiss their hands—especially when they have gloves on. They like it, and I don't mind."

"I should have thought," said Dick, "that that sort of thing was rather liable to misinterpretation."

"My dear fellow, you wouldn't think anything so absurd if you reflected upon all the difference that there is between the dignified incumbent of a country parish and a poor player out for a holiday. Besides, Miss Gardiner, as it happens, had more than earned my modest display of gratitude. I was going to tell you all about it, but I really don't think I can while you continue to look so like a displeased schoolmaster. Suppose we talk about Renunciation for a few minutes, instead. Is it your good pleasure that I should hack and slash the MS. ruthlessly until I bring it into line with my notions of what it ought to be?"

"If you will," answered Dick, his face clearing a little, "I shall be as grateful to you as you say you are to Miss Gardiner. By the way, would you, in the event of the piece being played, see any objection to your name being printed as that of the author?"

Harold considered for a moment before replying, "No; I see none, unless you do. I take it that I shall be, in a manner of speaking, the joint author, and my name, since it happens to be so well known professionally, might give the thing a lift."

"Just so," Dick agreed; "that is quite my own view. You will, as you say, be the joint author, and therefore entitled at least to your half of the honor and glory of which, for obvious reasons, I would rather not claim my share. Only it does seem to follow that you will likewise be entitled to half the pecuniary profits."

But Harold scouted that suggestion, which in truth offered little temptation to a man of his careless, open-handed proclivities.

"I couldn't think of pocketing a penny that I hadn't earned," he declared, thus unwittingly confirming—to his hearer's sense—Lilian's estimate of him. "It isn't in me, I am sorry to say, to write a play, and I am not even sure that it is in me to improve one. However, I can but try."

Dick, after some demur, refrained from pressing the point. He thought Harold uncommonly generous, and said so. He also began to think (and his being glad to think as much was no small evidence of generosity on his own part) that he had been unjust in suspecting his junior of infidelity. Presently he said, with some hesitation:

"Possibly gain to me might mean gain to you also. That is, if you can see your way, as I so very much wish you could, to playing the leading part in the production."

Harold smiled and shook his head. "I, too, wish I could see my way to doing that," he answered, "but I am afraid I must say definitely and finally now that I can't. Which brings me to what I was going to tell you when you discouraged me by your forbidding aspect. The fact is—prepare yourself for a slight shock—that I think of abandoning the stage altogether and becoming a candidate for Parliamentary honors in this division."

Dick's rounded eyes and dropped jaw proclaimed that the shock of such an announcement was anything but a slight one to him. "So *that* was Miss Gardiner's way of earning your thanks, was it?" he gasped. "Ah, I see!—I see!"

He evidently saw more in it than a mere offer of

Miss Gardiner's friendly offices, which, to be sure, saved time; although the silent, perturbed meditation into which he fell was not reassuring.

"But, Harold," he presently resumed, in awestruck accents, "this can only mean that you propose to stand in the interest of the opposition."

"Well, there is no sin in being a Radical, is there? According to your views, Radicals are in grievous error, I dare say, but they may be honestly mistaken, I suppose."

"That isn't the question," returned his brother, looking up suddenly and a little sternly; "the question is whether *you* are an honest Radical or not."

"Really," Harold declared, laughing, "I shouldn't wonder if I was. I have never been much of a party man; but, upon the whole, my sympathies are a good deal more with the people than with the privileged classes. However, I won't pretend to be enthusiastic about politics. The real truth is that I want to get out of a groove which has begun to weary and disgust me. Parliament and—and Miss Gardiner, if you like, seem to offer me a chance of escape—and I am going to take it."

The last words were pronounced so resolutely, almost defiantly, that Dick's next query seemed to follow as a matter of course.

"To take both, do you mean?"

"Good gracious! what startling leaps you make toward conclusions! Miss Gardiner is flattering enough to think that I may distinguish myself in the House; but she hasn't yet pushed flattery to the extent that you appear to imagine."

"I don't know what your resources are," said Dick, bluntly, "but, from what you yourself have told me, they can't be sufficient to keep you in idleness, much less to enable you to spend what the member for such a constituency as this will be expected to spend. If Miss Gardiner urges you to enter Parliament, that can only be because she is willing to furnish the wherewithal."

"What you say," observed Harold, tolerantly, "sounds like common sense; but you may have noticed that action based upon common sense seldom brings men to the front. Life is a game in which one must either play for high stakes or be contented with small earnings. Only you are not to assume, please, that I am playing for the stake of Sir Joseph's settlements."

Dick hesitated a while before making up his mind to say, "Candidly, I was under the impression that you had other wishes and hopes."

"So I have, my dear fellow; lots of others. The more one has the less likely one is to be disappointed, don't you think so? Well, I wanted to be the first to tell you what everybody must hear soon. Don't talk about it until it has become common talk; but perhaps, like a good soul, you will break the news to Anne for me? Anne isn't like you; she has a way of saying nasty things, when startled, and you can't think how much I dislike having nasty things said to me! You might enlighten her to-morrow after breakfast, when I shall be out of the way; for I must go up to London and see Shepherd, who is sure to be very nasty indeed. I can but trust that your play, which I shall take with me, may appease him. Shepherd is a man of business with a receptive mind, and

if he scents a promise of success and profit in the thing, he will be as keen about it as if the money were going into his own pocket."

Thus, not without adroitness, Harold wound up a necessary, but difficult, interview and betook himself to his bedroom, where, having no inclination to sleep, he sat and smoked for another couple of hours. During that time he read through Renunciation once more, making numerous excisions, adding words here and there, impressed in an ever-increasing degree with the excellence of his brother's work.

"Who would ever have believed that Dick could do this sort of thing?" he ejaculated. "The beggar must be a genius; there's no accounting for him in any other way. Yet he doesn't, goodness knows, look like one! Now I, who do look like one—at least, so women always give me to understand—could no more have created a single one of these situations than I could preach two sermons a week. I wish I could! I wish I were Dick! It's rather poor fun, somehow, to be myself."

Never very well satisfied with himself, he was more than usually dissatisfied that night. Josephine's rather irrational contempt for the art in which he excelled, and which he was personally wont to love and despise by turns, had depressed him; he remembered the vast difference which she professed to see between the producers of plays and their interpreters, the former being, according to her, necessarily dowered with some brains, while the latter might be, and often were, neither more nor less intelligent than so many parrots. He was by no means sure that she did not overestimate his own intelligence,

by no means sure that he had not allowed himself to be enticed away from his vocation on a fool's errand. And what, now that he was reluctantly brought face to face with it in the silence of night, was precisely that errand? The acquisition of Dunville Manor at a price which he had already pronounced too high? But he had not yet quite paid that price, although he had, in a manner of speaking, burned his ships; he had not yet proposed to Josephine, had not yet been openly false in his allegiance to Lilian. There remained the chapter of accidents—that blessed chapter of accidents upon which he had so often relied, and which had more than once enabled him, while running with the hare, to hunt for a while with the hounds. He wanted, in the words of another homely proverb, to eat his cake and keep it. Of course he knew that this was impossible; nevertheless, it is sometimes pleasant to dream of impossibilities, and pleasant dreams always soothed him. So he soon exchanged waking for sleeping ones.

Realities, more or less unpleasant, had to be dealt with on the morrow in Ashley Gardens, where Shepherd, warned by telegram, met him at the moment of his arrival. Shepherd, rendered visibly apprehensive (for he knew his man very well indeed) by a summons which he had not expected, began almost at once:

"Now, I wonder what fresh notion you have been taking into your head. You haven't come up to London in order to make arrangements for the winter season, I am quite sure; that wouldn't be at all like you."

"It would not," Harold agreed, with a half-apologetic laugh. "No, my dear Shepherd, I found out long

ago that business arrangements are best left in your very capable hands, and I haven't the slightest doubt that those which must be undertaken now will be carried through by you as satisfactorily to us both as all our previous transactions have been. Only it makes me awfully sorry to think that they involve the close of our partnership."

"The close of our partnership?" echoed Shepherd, with raised eyebrows.

"Yes; in a word, I am going to cut the stage. Don't scold and protest until I have finished. When you have heard me out, you will still think me an ass, I dare say, but you will see at least that I don't propose to quarrel with my bread and butter for the sake of a trifle."

Shepherd, when he had heard Harold out, did most emphatically think him an ass, but knew better than to say so. What he did say, after mentally filling up without difficulty some significant omissions in the other's narrative, was:

"Your plan might sound tempting if there were any guarantee of its coming off; but, from what you tell me, there seems to be none. You may be defeated at the poll, and then the whole house of cards comes down with a run, doesn't it? Surely it would be wiser to stick to the old love until you are sure of being on with the new!"

"Perhaps it would be, supposing there were time. Only, you see, the general election will hardly take place before the middle of October, and Moore will soon want to know whether we mean to renew our lease of the theater or not, won't he?"

Shepherd nodded, stroking his chin reflectively.

"Yes, he wants to know; in fact, I was upon the point of writing for your authority to renew it. In my opinion, you would do well to renew it; I don't believe you would lose money in that way. Of course, your being returned to Parliament would oblige you to abandon the stage; but, with Sanford to take your parts, I imagine that we should be able to keep the house pretty well filled for a few months. Then, in case of failure, a way of retreat would lie open to you."

But Harold was so far determined as to be impatient of compromises. He clearly perceived, moreover, that the suggested compromise would never work. He could no more explain why it was unworkable than he could dispute the assertion that, with defeat at the poll, what Shepherd had called his house of cards must fall to the ground; he could not state in plain words that the corner-stone of his plan was the acquisition of Miss Gardiner's fortune, which would not necessarily be denied to him in consequence of an initial failure, nor could he point out how indispensable it was that he should be in a position to inform Josephine of his prompt obedience to her behests.

Delicacy, however, though commendable, was superfluous in dealing with so shrewd a personage as Shepherd, who perfectly understood all that his interlocutor abstained from urging, and likewise understood ere long that further expostulation would be futile.

"Well," he ended by saying, "I wish you good luck. But I'm sorry—both for your sake and for my own."

"It certainly does look like leaving you in the lurch, old man," Harold compunctiously remarked.

"Oh, don't trouble your head about that; I am in no danger of having to beg my bread. Moore, for one, asks nothing better than to pay me a high salary for my services, and I may very likely offer them to him, now that he will have the theater on his hands again. But I shall regret you as an actor who hasn't his like, or anything resembling his like, in this country, and also—if I may be allowed to say so—as a friend."

"My dear fellow, you aren't going to lose me as a friend."

Shepherd smilingly shook his head. "Our paths are about to diverge," said he.

"If you call that a reason, you must take a precious narrow view of friendship! To show you how much broader mine is, let me lose no time in asking a favor of you. I want you to read a play by an entirely unknown writer and tell me how it strikes you."

Shepherd pricked up his ears. "A play from your own pen?" he asked, rather eagerly. "I have often thought that you might produce one, if you cared to take the trouble."

"Then you have often appraised the contents of my skull above their value. I can't create; I can only mimic. No; this thing is the work of my elder brother, revised and corrected, as you will see, by me. To my mind it is splendid; but, after all, what do I know? *You* know better than anybody else in England what can be made to go and what can't; so I shall advise Dick to abide by your verdict, whether it is a disappointing one or not. Take it away with you, anyhow, and let me have an answer as soon as you can. You will want me to stay a few

more days in London for the purpose of signing documents and winding matters up generally, I presume."

"Yes; I shall be glad if you can make it convenient to remain in town a little longer, although there isn't much to be done that I can't do for you. But about the play, you shall have an answer to-morrow morning; I shall not need to give more than a couple of hours, perhaps not as much, to it."

A great deal of Shepherd's spare time was devoted to the writing of theatrical criticisms for the newspapers, as well as to advising theatrical managers, who held his judgment in high esteem. He had discovered more than one subsequently famous playwright, and in such discoveries he took the delight of a connoisseur or a collector. He was, therefore, quite sincere in declaring that Harold, so far from requesting a favor of him, had conferred one. "Only," he was careful to add, "don't expect encouragement, for I am afraid the chances are against your getting it."

On the following morning, however, he made his appearance at the breakfast hour with the gratifying announcement that he thought very well indeed of Renunciation.

"A most interesting play, admirably written," said he. "Your emendations, too, are excellent. I have very little doubt that I can get one of three or four men to accept it; but—I am bound to add that I doubt very much whether any of them is capable of doing justice to the principal part. I needn't point out to you, because I am sure you must have seen, who *is* capable of doing justice to it."

"Ah! you think so?"

"What else could I think? Why, it is your part!—obviously written for you, and for no other living actor. Don't you feel tempted?"

"I feel immensely tempted, Shepherd, and all the more so because I must turn a deaf ear to the voice of temptation. Nothing is more certain than that Renunciation must be renounced by me; somebody else will have to wear my laurels. Moore might play the part, perhaps."

"After a fashion, yes. With your permission, I will submit it in the first instance to Moore, who is pretty sure at least to think that he can play it, which is something, *faute de mieux.*"

"It is the most and the best that we can do," Harold declared, decisively (for at that moment he suddenly hated the idea of being supplanted by Moore, and he was a little afraid of his impulses). "I'll write at once to Dick, who will be overjoyed at hearing your report. One more feather in your cap, Shepherd, I hope, and perhaps just a humble sort of a feather in mine. For, when all's said, my emendations *were* judicious, weren't they?"

CHAPTER XI

MANY COUNSELORS

HAROLD DUNVILLE was not one of those gifted persons whose mental grasp is such that they are able to think about a half a dozen things at one and the same time; which was doubtless one reason why his brow remained smooth and his dark hair free from premature streaks of gray. He did not, therefore, trouble his head respecting the effect of his recent decision upon former colleagues of his until one afternoon when Shepherd (whose head had necessarily been a good deal troubled upon the subject) remarked, sighing rather wearily:

"Well, I believe I have now got matters fairly into trim. Moore empowers me, and indeed begs me, to reopen the theater with a revival and with the old company until he can bring his own company back from the United States, which will hardly be before Christmas. Sandford agrees to play your part, and the others, with one exception, don't complain. Of course, they wouldn't have any right to complain; but Miss Fitzwalter, unfortunately, does. She absolutely refuses to act without you, I am sorry to say; so I must look out for a substitute."

"By Jove!" muttered Harold, with a rueful countenance, "I had forgotten all about her!"

"That I can well believe."

"It's hard lines upon her, you know," Harold resumed, meditatively, after a moment.

"It may be; I am scarcely in a position to judge. At the same time, her grievance, if we must allow her to have a grievance, is a purely sentimental one, you must remember. There has been no breach of contract on our part."

"No; only sentimental grievances are always the hardest to deal with, and I dare say she thinks I might have told her of my intentions personally. I did say something about looking her up at Scarborough; but, what with one thing and another, it escaped my memory. Well, I'll run down and see her now; that will be the best plan, and it's a mere question of twenty-four hours. Oh, I expect she'll be all right as soon as I have explained everything and smoothed her down," cheerfully concluded Harold, who had smoothed Miss Fitzwalter down with success on more than one previous occasion.

But Shepherd, smiling slightly, said: "Perhaps a still better plan would be to run down somewhere where you won't see her. Scarborough, it is true, fulfils that condition, though I imagine that you would prefer Kent."

"Oh! then she's in London, I suppose."

"Otherwise I shouldn't have mentioned her to you. My letter to her brought her down upon me like a cartload of bricks, and I need scarcely add that I haven't mentioned to her the fact of your being in London. The danger, of course, is that she may make the discovery for herself at any moment."

"I don't know why you should call that a danger," Harold returned, frowning.

"Oh, my dear Dunville!"

"No; I really don't. My relations with her are not, and never have been, what you think——"

"How can you tell what I think?"

"I can guess. She is sometimes unreasonable, I grant you, and—and jealous, if you like to use the word; but she has been a good friend to me, and, laugh as you may, I believe that, if all the circumstances were laid before her, she would be the last to oppose any scheme that tended toward my advancement in life."

"Indeed! Shall I let her know that you are here, then?"

"Do so, by all means. I have a clear conscience, and I don't feel bound to run away from anybody."

Shepherd laughed. "Ah, well, I shall not let her know, and I should advise you to run away, conscience and all. What is the use of a clear conscience in dealing with unreasonable and jealous women? I don't want to interfere; I ask no questions and name no names; I merely caution you that Miss Fitzwalter is much too angry to hesitate about naming in a loud voice the lady who, according to her, is at the bottom of your change of plans."

"H'm! she named Miss Gardiner, did she?"

Shepherd laughed again. "What! another one? This is becoming complicated. No; between ourselves, and strictly between ourselves, she named a Miss Ormond."

"Ah, there you are! That just shows how unreason-

able she is; for it so happens that if there is a person who is quite sure to resent my coming forward as a Radical candidate, it is that same Miss Ormond."

"Which leaves you to account as best you may for the other young lady, I presume. Take my advice, Dunville; don't try to account for anybody, least of all for yourself, but be off and leave me to manage Miss Fitzwalter. She can do without us, and we can do without her at a pinch, though I won't deny that we should do better with her. What is more to the point is that she must do without you, and it isn't by a stormy interview that you will bring her to a realizing sense of that necessity."

This seemed obvious. Moreover, Harold disliked stormy interviews even more than he disliked the idea of distressing a woman to whom he was honestly attached, but who was, after all, bound to be distressed by his compulsory abandonment of her. So he sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and accepted wise counsel.

"I say, though," he pleaded in conclusion, "you'll tell her I'm awfully sorry, won't you?"

"That might not have a very soothing effect. I propose, with your permission, to tell her nothing, except that you are busy canvassing down in the country. The essential thing, you see, is to convince her that you are quite out of reach."

Harold, at all events, could not help seeing how desirable it was that he should put himself out of Lorna's reach. He did so that same afternoon, and long before reaching his destination he had comfortably dismissed her and her deluded tantrums from his mind. Other la-

dies—possibly also other tantrums—must now be encountered. And, to begin with, he had to face the ironical scrutiny of his sister Anne, who, meeting him on his arrival at the rectory, remarked:

"So you have been taking the plunge, eh? How do you feel after it? At all out of your depth?"

"Absolutely out of my depth," answered Harold, smiling. "I can swim, though."

"You think so, do you? Well, it's a case of swim or sink, anyhow, and I should rather admire your courage if I could get up any admiration for your conduct in other respects."

"It isn't asked of you to admire my Radicalism."

"Oh, your Radicalism!" exclaimed Anne, with her wry smile, and said no more for a minute. But presently she resumed: "I ought to be glad that you have committed yourself to this rather hazardous project, and in a sense I am glad; for it ought at least to make Lilian safe from you, whether you win or lose. Nevertheless, I can't help having a compunctious feeling about you—is it because we are of the same flesh and blood, although we are so little alike, do you suppose?—a sort of premature compassion for you. I doubt whether you have counted the cost of failure."

"Oh, yes; I don't look upon my being returned as by any means a certainty."

"It is far from being a certainty, I should say, notwithstanding the Gardiners and their money. But shall I tell you what is a virtual certainty? Josephine Gardiner won't marry you unless you are returned; possibly not even if you are."

"And who says that I am ambitious of marrying Miss Gardiner?"

"Why, you do, of course. If you don't mean that, what on earth can you possibly mean? That is why I half admire you and am half sorry for you. Because I believe that, after your fashion, you are really fond of Lilian, and I know what Josephine is. She will push you on and very likely make you happy if you start with a success; but she has no use for failures. Nor the slightest hesitation about tossing them aside, you'll find."

"I am glad, at all events, that you don't object to my tossing aside the family politics," remarked Harold, not knowing very well what to say.

"My objections—supposing I had any—wouldn't give you a sleepless night, I imagine. Besides, I haven't a vote, so it doesn't matter. Dick, poor fellow, will have to vote against you, and I shouldn't wonder if the thought of that duty were to interfere with his slumbers a little. Dick, I may tell you, is a good deal more perturbed than I am. But then, although he is worth a hundred of me, he has never had quite the nice sense of proportion upon which I humbly pride myself."

"I suppose you mean that my proportionate worth is microscopic. Yet you don't look or sound altogether unfriendly, somehow."

"I'm not altogether unfriendly," Anne declared; "I hope you'll win—on every ground. When is the announcement to be proclaimed to an amazed and agreeably scandalized county? Of course neither Dick nor I have breathed a word as yet."

"Thanks, I was sure you wouldn't. About the time

of the announcement I know nothing; I am awaiting instructions."

He was not made to wait long. On the following morning he was received by appointment in Miss Gardiner's own private sitting-room, which was a large and airy one on the first floor, artistically, if somewhat heterogeneously, furnished and filled to overflowing with books, old and new. These not only lined the walls, but were scattered untidily over chairs and tables, and Harold might have been amused, had he examined them, by the comprehensive taste in literature which they seemed to imply. But he did not examine them, preferring to reserve the use of his eyes for other purposes. And, indeed, Josephine's features, always attractive by reason of their mobility, were more than usually pleasant to watch that morning, for she was in high good humor with her visitor.

"Your letter from London was charmingly worded, in addition to setting my mind at ease," she was kind enough to say. "I am so glad that the ground is now clear and that we can proceed at once to action. You have heard, perhaps, that the Tories have secured a candidate already. No? Well, they have, and I wish them joy of him. A certain Captain Desborough, a retired naval man who has come into money lately, but who doesn't belong to this part of the world and isn't at all likely, from what I hear, to be formidable as an opponent. Your first speech should take the wind out of his sails."

"The bare thought of making my first speech gives me the shivers in anticipation," Harold declared, laughing. "Am I within sight of that ordeal?"

"Upon the verge of it, I imagine; but my father will put you in possession of all details and give you what coaching may be necessary. I don't believe in your shivers; I have heard you recite."

"You might as well say that you have seen me dance, or tumble in the ring!"

"I only mean that you won't show nervousness and that you know how to manage your voice. Of course I can't tell whether you have any special aptitude for political oratory or not. I don't care, either; for none is required. You will be told what to say and what to leave unsaid."

Everything, it appeared, was arranged for him; all he had to do was to step forward at given moments, as upon a more familiar stage, and play a rehearsed part. He was not quite sure that he liked being thus cavalierly bitted and bridled, although he did rather like the implication that this business of addressing meetings, capturing votes, and getting himself returned to Parliament was merely preliminary and perfunctory.

"I wonder what you mean to do with me after you have converted me into an elected legislator," said he.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Josephine frankly avowed; "so much will have to depend upon the impressions that one may get of you in a fresh setting. But I'm tremendously interested in the experiment."

"And a little, I hope, in the humble subject of the experiment?"

"Oh, naturally! Otherwise you wouldn't be here, you know."

If he interested her, she likewise interested him, with

her vivacity, her cheerfully imperious ways, her superb assumption that whatever she might be pleased to decree would assuredly come to pass. He was not in love with Josephine—how could he be, when his whole heart still belonged to Lilian Ormond? Yet he was resolved that the option of winning her, and with her the succession to Dunville Manor, should ultimately be his. He had not given up what he had given up for the sake of an off-chance. So he threw himself into the character of a devoted admirer with all his accustomed spirit and ease, forgetting (likewise with accustomed ease) all that it was convenient to forget, until the thunder of a distant gong announced the luncheon hour.

Upon this he was begged to wait for one minute while Miss Gardiner "made herself decent," and, as the stipulated minute had protracted itself into twenty before she reappeared, their joint entrance into the dining-room, where some score of people were already seated, produced the general stir which it may have been designed to bring about. Harold perceived at once that he was being introduced as the Radical candidate, and that the company had been prepared to receive him in that capacity. Conversation abruptly ceased; Sir Joseph, who (doubtless to mark the exceptional nature of the occasion) was present, got up and shook him by the hand, as did several other gentlemen with whom he had not been previously acquainted; Lady Gardiner, with a dog on her lap, did not, to be sure, rise, but she waved him a friendly greeting, while somebody said:

"We were beginning to be afraid that you meant to keep Mr. Dunville all to yourself, Miss Gardiner."

Harold, inured though he was to crowds and curious scrutiny, was slightly confused, and it was not until he had slipped into the chair reserved for him that he recognized in his left-hand neighbor the very last person whom he had expected to see—perhaps the very last whom he would have wished to see at that particular juncture. With him, however, embarrassment was always a transient discomfort, and one rapid glance at Lilian Ormond's face brought him relief. She was not—heaven be praised! —angry; she did not even look reproachful or interrogative; her expression, strange to say, revealed nothing but pleasure at the sight of him. Presently he was able to murmur in her ear:

"I have sprung a surprise upon you, haven't I? But you can understand how it was. I should have told you what was in the wind if I had been allowed to tell anybody; but I only came back from London last night, and——"

"Oh, yes, I know," she interrupted, smiling, "and I don't feel at all aggrieved. You would indeed have been a bold man if you had let my father's daughter into your secret!"

"Ah—well—that was just it, you see," agreed Harold, eagerly appropriating an excuse of which he had not thought before. "I suppose Mr. Ormond is furious, isn't he?"

"I am afraid there can't be the shadow of a doubt that he will be; but at present he hasn't heard. I don't think anybody had until just now, when Sir Joseph told us all that you had consented to stand against Captain Desborough."

"And you?—you aren't furious, I hope?"

"Of course not; you have just as good a right to be a Liberal as we have to be Conservatives, I suppose. Indeed, to tell the truth, I am not at all sure that I know in what the difference between Conservatives and Liberals consists."

"Miss Gardiner pretends that there is none of any consequence; but your father, probably, is so far from taking that philosophical view that he would kick me out of the house if I dared to call at Beechwood, wouldn't he?"

"Oh, I hope not. He might be very rude, though. Upon the whole, I think you had better avoid meeting him for a time."

"Only that means that I shall have to avoid meeting you, too," sighed Harold.

The girl laughed. "Well, if you will insist upon doing things just because Josephine tells you to do them! Not that you are singular there; for we all obey Josephine more or less, and very seldom get any thanks for our pains."

She spoke without a suggestion of bitterness, and a pang shot through her hearer's heart as it dawned upon him that perhaps, after all, she could resign him to her rival without any pang at her own. He had been talking in a subdued voice, which he now lowered into a whisper to say:

"You know whom I would so infinitely rather obey! You can understand, I dare say, that all this goes rather against the grain with me in some ways, but that I have

motives—motives which sometimes look almost like duties. If we were alone I could explain—— "

"You needn't," she interrupted; "I quite understand."

Then their eyes met, and hers said, as plainly as eyes could speak, "It makes no difference what you do or what your motives are; I trust you."

He ought to have been horribly ashamed of himself, and so for an instant he was; but joy and relief made short work of remorse. This was just what he wanted—to break no bonds and yet be free. Lilian herself had furnished him with an excellent reason for giving her family a wide berth; she would not resent apparent neglect; she knew the truth. By this he meant that she knew he loved her; that it would be scarcely possible for her to love him were she told the real truth was a reflection far too disagreeable for him to face.

As soon as luncheon was over he was beckoned into Sir Joseph Gardiner's den to receive information and instructions. Sir Joseph, who had not, personally, taken a fancy to the young actor, but whose personal sentiments were seldom obtruded by him or considered by others, was brief, business-like, and mildly imperative. Having satisfied himself that the candidate was ready to swallow the Radical program whole, he proceeded to particulars. Mr. Dunville would be so good as to say this and avoid allusion to that, unless questioned. If questioned, he would reply in such and such a sense. He would bear in mind always that his business was to attack the present administration, not to make promises on behalf of a government as yet non-existent. With regard to local mat-

ters, however, he might be more definite and commit himself to certain specified pledges.

"Provided that you make no glaring mistakes, I think we shall get you in, sir. We have been active for some time past, while the people on the other side have been careless and clumsy to an extent which, as we calculate, should lose them at least a couple of hundred votes. It is believed that your name will do something for you, and I suppose I may say that my support will do more."

"I'm awfully grateful to you, Sir Joseph," Harold declared.

The little sandy-haired man looked at him with rapidly blinking eyes, pulled his ragged whiskers, and answered, "Not at all, sir, not at all! If you must thank anybody, thank my daughter, upon whose—er—recommendation I agreed to do what was in my power for you. My own object, naturally, is to win a seat for the political party to which I belong."

He seemed to be upon the point of adding something and to think better of it. Presently, his gaze straying to the table, upon which lay several handsomely bound albums of gigantic size, he asked, "You are not, by any chance, a philatelist, are you?"

Harold regretted that he was not.

"Ah, then my collection would not interest you. A mere hobby, of course; though it serves its purpose—serves its purpose. My daughter has numerous hobbies; but I notice that she does not ride them long. Perhaps that is rather unfortunate for her."

"And for the hobbies?" suggested Harold, who perceived with some amusement that Anne's admonitions

were being reenforced from this somewhat unexpected quarter.

"It may be so," returned Sir Joseph, hurriedly; "it may be so. You are giving up the stage, I understand."

"I must if I am to go into Parliament."

"No doubt. H'm!—well, you are striking out a new line for yourself, Mr. Dunville; you may be well advised in doing so or you may not; time alone can show. But that is your affair, not mine. What I have to do is merely, as I say, to secure, if possible, the return of a good Radical as member for this division. I don't think I need keep you any longer from the ladies now, sir."

CHAPTER XII

DIFFICULT NAVIGATION

THE very encouraging news respecting the prospects of his play which his younger brother brought back to him from London pleased the rector of the parish so much that he felt able to meet with more equanimity than he might otherwise have achieved sundry comments of his parishioners upon what they saw fit to call Harold's political treachery. Of course a man who happens to differ politically from his family and his progenitors ought not on that account to be stigmatized as a traitor; the defense so far was easy and obvious. But when it was bluntly put to him that the candidate for Parliamentary honors was a candidate for Miss Gardiner's fortune in the first place and a Radical, or whatever else she might choose to make of him, in the second, Dick, who had his own misgivings, was rendered uncomfortable, and showed that he was so. *Honi soit qui mal y pense* was all he could say, and to Harold he said as little as possible upon a topic which, for a week or ten days, was discussed to the exclusion of every other by the entire neighborhood.

Harold, to be sure, had very little leisure for discussing either politics or the drama at the rectory, where he scarcely did more than sleep during those opening days of his campaign. When he was not at the manor he was

being driven hither and thither throughout the constituency, interviewing voters, hunting up acquaintances of bygone years, shaking innumerable hands, proclaiming in winning words the faith which was more or less in him. Upon the whole, he enjoyed himself immensely. It was all so novel, so amusing, and (perhaps by reason of Josephine's exhilarating company and apparent enthusiasm for the cause) so instinct with coming triumph! Harold's nature was such that he could always convert himself without difficulty for the time being into any character that he was required to personate, and this happy faculty of his freed him from the nuisance of convictions which might be liable to disturbance. Having accepted the part of a Radical postulant, all he had to do was to play that part to the very best of his ability. Thus he earned alike his own approval and that of his diligent backers.

"The only thing that I find to criticize in your ways of going on," the most important of these backers told him, "is that you work the social equality idea for just a little more than it is worth. You shouldn't be always impressing upon the people that they are every bit as good as you are, unless they chance to be better."

"But surely that is what you yourself are in the habit of doing," objected Harold.

"Oh, yes, that's my line for electioneering purposes; I go in for being the daughter of a self-made father and leave my mother's pedigree in the background. But you are different; you have to remember, and to keep them in mind, that you are Dunville of Dunville Manor."

"Only I am nothing of the sort."

"Well, you are going to be; you mean to be."

"Do I? I wonder how."

"Oh, bother the 'how'!" cried Josephine, impatiently. "You were to make money and buy us out, weren't you?—really I forget. These details are so entirely subsidiary! But you must have that ambition, please, or I shall feel that I have misinterpreted you, which would be most disappointing and vexatious at this advanced stage of the proceedings."

"I have all the audacious ambitions that you wish me to have," Harold declared; "perhaps even some that you don't."

"Very well, then, it follows that you can't afford to make yourself too cheap. Friendly and unassuming, yes; a democratic Dunville as much as you please, but—always a Dunville, for all that. The snobbishness of which we are so fond of accusing one another in this country isn't quite the ignoble thing that we pretend; in reality it is more a pathetic, lingering appreciation of the picturesque than anything else. For Heaven's sake don't cease to be picturesque, unless you want to alienate a heap of worthy electors and lose, among other trifles, my own humble admiration and interest."

He certainly did not want to lose that, nor was he altogether devoid of the ambition so persistently imputed to him; yet as time went on, there came moments when he asked himself whether the game was, or was going to be, worth the candle. He was conscious that his addresses to rural meetings, delivered always at a most inconvenient hour of the evening, were scarcely as successful as they should have been. He spoke fluently and gracefully, but he failed, somehow, to catch hold of his stolid au-

dience, whereas it was reported that Captain Desborough, who had no pretensions to oratory, managed to draw cheers and laughter from similar assemblages. This irritated Miss Gardiner, who, when irritated, was apt to speak her mind.

"What you have to do is so simple and yet so hard to define!" she exclaimed one night, after he had resumed his seat without any reward in the shape of applause. "I could do it myself as easily as I can see the difference between studied eloquence and bluff jocularity; but you, for some reason or other, don't seem to see the obvious. If I didn't know how clever you are, I should be tempted to call you stupid."

"Perhaps," Harold could not help retorting, half angrily, half despondently (for he hated to be called stupid), "you haven't, in spite of all your cleverness, realized the difference that there is between an actor and a stump orator."

She drummed impatiently with her foot upon the boards of the platform. "As if you were only an actor! As if I should ever have troubled myself to take up a mere actor!"

Such remarks, which sounded very like veiled threats and exhibited disquieting presages for the future, gave Harold's self-satisfaction pause. He was an easy-going mortal; he wanted, so far as in him lay, to be at peace with all the world, and he foresaw that the life of Josephine's husband was likely to be one of little ease. Then, too, he was brought at last face to face with Mr. Ormond after a fashion extremely disagreeable to him. He was walking down the principal street of the neigh-

boring county town on a certain afternoon, when he encountered the old gentleman, who at once pulled up the mail-phaeton in which he was seated, with his daughter by his side, and called out:

"Glad to have met you! I wanted to see you, in order to tell you plainly what I think of your conduct. In my opinion, you have played us a shabby trick. Now, Lil, you must let me finish, please; I've heard what you have to say, and I don't agree with you. If Mr. Harold Dunville was a Radical he ought to have told us so before he accepted our hospitality and became intimate in our house; then we should have known where we were. As it is, he has put me in a false position. And I am bound to add," continued Mr. Ormond, who was very red in the face, "that to my mind you are putting your poor brother in a false position by taking up your quarters at Dunville rectory, of all places in the world!"

Harold really could not see why Mr. Ormond should feel bound to make that addition to his other somewhat unwarrantable complaints; but, encouraged by Lilian's appealing glance, he tried the effect of a soft answer.

"I assure you, Mr. Ormond," said he, "that if you had asked me what my views were, I shouldn't have concealed them. It was natural, I dare say, that you should have taken me for a born Conservative; but you will admit that I have never professed to be one. I can't accuse myself of having intentionally misled you, or I would gladly apologize; for I shall never forget how kind you have all been to me."

Mr. Ormond shook his head vehemently. "Plausible, but not straight," was his uncompromising rejoinder.

"You must have known perfectly well that no traitor to his country—and, mind you, I hold that all you so-called Little Englanders are neither more nor less than traitors—could ever be received in my house. I am sorry to have to say such a thing to your father's son, but I must tell you that you can never be received there again."

Harold, with Lilian's eyes still upon him and a visible deprecation of paternal severity in her faint smile, murmured something about its taking two to make a quarrel; but the old gentleman was not to be pacified.

"I beg your pardon; that's a popular fallacy. One is quite enough, and in the present instance I am that one. Henceforth, if you please, we are strangers."

He drew his whip sharply across the off horse's quarters and disappeared in a twinkling. It may be that his daughter's championship of the renegade had aroused in his mind painful suspicions which ought to have found their way thither before, but the chances are that he would in any case have thought it incumbent upon him to break off relations with so anomalous a being as a Radical Dunville.

That sort of thing could not but distress Harold, whose ardent wish it always was that his fellow creatures should like him and think well of him. Distressing also, in a somewhat similar way, was an indignant and reproachful missive from Miss Lorna Fitzwalter, which reached him the same evening. Miss Fitzwalter wanted to know what all this meant. Surely, she urged, she had some right to expect information! Harold must be aware that she had never opposed, and never would oppose, anything of a nature to promote his welfare; but to throw her

over without ceremony and depute " that impudent fellow Shepherd " to make substituted professional engagements for her was not playing the game. If that Ormond girl was not at the bottom of the whole business, what woman was? Harold need not trouble himself to deny that there was a woman in the case; for his correspondent knew better than to believe that. The rest of the letter was half affectionate, half minatory. The writer's meaning, Harold took it, was that she might be conciliated, but that she did not intend to be ignored, and previous experience of her warned him that it was not her way to shrink from the absurdity of making scenes upon occasion. He could quite easily, for example, imagine her descending like a whirlwind upon Dunville Manor and denouncing him to its astonished inmates. He concluded, therefore, with a sigh and a shrug, that his wisest course would be to go up to London and see her.

The following morning's post brought him a letter which would of itself have decided him to make the journey. Mr. Moore, it appeared, had returned somewhat hurriedly from the United States, leaving his company to finish their program without him, and was very anxious to confer with Harold respecting " a striking play from your pen which Shepherd has submitted to me." Moore wanted to take the piece, thought that there were the elements of a success in it, and saw how much might be made out of the leading part. " But I can not commit myself until I have had a talk with you and obtained your permission to adapt the thing to what may be my requirements. It is a thousand pities that you should be unable to interpret your own work with your own lips; for

neither I nor anybody else can play the character as you would have played it. Still, I do not say that it is beyond me; I only hope that you can spare time to run up and discuss difficulties with me."

Such a request, coming from Moore, whose reputation as an actor stood a good deal above his junior's, was distinctly flattering, and Harold, notwithstanding his final abandonment of the stage, was flattered by it. Heralded by a telegram which he made haste to despatch, he was in London a few hours later; so that the requested conference was brought about with as little delay as possible. Mr. Moore, a clean-shaven, grizzle-headed man, with the wrecked complexion of his calling, dined by invitation with Harold at the latter's club and had a good deal to say, in a rather nervous, jerky style, about Renunciation.

"As a play it's good—excellent," he declared; "the only trouble is its being so visibly written by you for yourself. Don't you see how that handicaps me? Every critic will start his article by pointing out that I'm a substitute. This quiet, cynical, sublime hero of yours, who gives up everything and pretends all the while to care for nobody's convenience but his own—well, he isn't a novelty, of course, and he's a pretty sure draw, if interpreted. But in this particular case he requires rather delicate interpretation; he has, in short, to be "—Mr. Moore paused for a moment before bringing out, with a gasp and a laugh, the unpalatable word—"a gentleman."

"Oh, but, my dear fellow!" protested Harold.

"Yes, yes; thank you very much," returned the other; "you could say no less, I suppose. But, say what you will, there's the rub. We are talking privately, and

I can't afford to be mealy-mouthed. Nor can I afford a disaster. Between ourselves, my American venture hasn't brought me in half as much as I hoped it would; your deciding not to renew your lease of the theater has been rather a disappointment to me, and I must, if I possibly can, begin the new year with something that promises a longish run—something that will at least tide us over Lent. Now, I have wit enough to see that in my hands the success or failure of Renunciation would be touch and go; though the piece would be safe enough in yours."

"In other words," said Harold, laughing, but not ill pleased, "you are suffering from an attack of nerves. Bless your soul! you'll be all right after the first rehearsal. Of course you can play the part just as well as I can, and probably a great deal better. You talk about my having written the play for myself; but Shepherd must have told you, I presume, that I didn't write it at all. The work is my brother's, merely touched up and corrected a little by me."

"Whether you wrote it for yourself or your brother wrote it for you makes no difference. The part was created for you, and everybody will see at a glance that it was. I shall have to make alterations, I expect, if I am to do any good. Really, Dunville, I hardly feel that I can accept your play in its present form."

His vanity had to be adroitly tickled, his not unfounded misgivings had to be allayed. The very fact that Moore had detected a danger which would have escaped most of his contemporaries went far toward proving him the one available man to win public acceptance—perhaps

even public enthusiasm—for Renunciation; only he must not be allowed to spoil the play by shifting the burden of its support on to the shoulders of subordinate characters. Harold, who was himself enthusiastic about it by this time, and became more and more so the longer he talked, not only ended by triumphing over the other's hesitation, but could not repress a cry of quite sincere professional jealousy.

"Ah, Moore, don't I wish I were in your shoes! You're going to eclipse your record!"

Moore, soothed by eloquence, champagne, and a subsequent cigarette, smiled and shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly. "Well, my dear Dunville, I hope so—I can only hope so. But I assure you that I would very gladly see you in my shoes as lessee of the St. Martin's. I *may*, as you obligingly prophesy, eclipse my record by Renunciation, but you undoubtedly would, if you were but willing to stick to the ship."

"Oh, I've burnt my ship," answered Harold, with a wave of his hand and a touch of regret in his voice. "I've embarked upon a brand new vessel. Whether she'll turn out to be seaworthy or not remains to be seen."

The older man surveyed him curiously. "I suppose you know your own business best," he remarked, looking as though he doubted it. Then, after smoking in silence for a moment, "I wish you could induce Miss Fitzwalter to give us her help. She isn't a very easy person to deal with, but she can always be depended upon to do her best, and the part that she would have to take if we produced your play ought to suit her, I think."

"I'll ask her, if you like," Harold promised; "I was going to look her up to-morrow, anyhow."

Something seemed to tickle Mr. Moore, for an abrupt, quickly checked laugh escaped him. He accounted for his brief hilarity by remarking:

"Shepherd is rather funny about her. He isn't what you could call a constitutionally timid man, but he absolutely refuses to make any further advances to her. He says he doesn't believe his features would be safe if he did. Well, well! women are queer, aren't they? But I think, you know, that if *you* were to approach her discreetly—not, of course, representing us as over and above eager to secure her, but begging her, as a personal favor, to give your play a hand, she might—eh?"

"Oh, yes; I think very likely she would," Harold airily replied. "At all events, I can but try, and I am not much afraid of her scratching my face."

Without exaggerated pusillanimity, he really might have been; but it was true enough that he was not. Poor Lorna had so often proved amenable to treatment in the use of which he was an adept! On the morrow, therefore, he betook himself to the little house in far West Kensington, where she dwelt, prepared for nothing worse than tears—unless, indeed, subsequent embraces were to be counted as something worse. But he found, when he was admitted, that he had to face a rather more angry woman than he had expected to encounter.

"It is monstrous!" Miss Fitzwalter cried; "I don't know why I go on bearing it! Everybody, it seems, is to be told of your plans before I am. Not so much as a postcard is vouchsafed to me; I am simply tossed aside like

an old glove as soon as anybody or anything more attractive turns up! And yet, Heaven knows, it isn't asking a great deal to ask for confidence after one has given up all claim to constancy! You try me too much; one of these days you may discover that you have tried me too much!"

To pacify her took a very long time and what purported to be a very full confession. Even when the latter, accompanied as it was by warm assurances of affection and penitence, had brought down the anticipated alleviating shower of tears, clouds lingered upon Lorna's brow.

"The worst of it is," she rather pathetically sighed, "that I can't believe you, much as I should like to believe you! It may be true that your flirtation with one girl has been extinguished by your quarrel with her father, and that you are making a fool and a tool of the other so that she may help to pitchfork you into Parliament; but it doesn't sound very much like the truth. And when you have got into Parliament, what next? You have no money!"

"Oh, I have a little."

"Sufficient to pay your election expenses and see you through a few more months, perhaps. I am an ignorant woman, but I do know that this talk about members being eligible for good appointments and about your ultimately returning to the home of your ancestors must be rubbish. Besides, supposing that that were really what you are driving at, what would it mean? For one thing, that you would have no more to say to old friends who were of some service to you in the days when you needed friends."

Harold vowed that it never would or could mean any-

thing so ignoble. He was not ungrateful for past benefits; he was fond, in his way, of this excitable woman, whose fondness for him had so often taken practical shape, and whose patient fidelity had been a frequent source of amazement to him; only he did wish she would realize that matrimonial designs were futile. That point once established, there would be nothing further to impede the smooth course of friendship. The present occasion, however, was obviously not a propitious one for establishing it, nor did he attempt the enterprise. On the contrary, his efforts were employed in quite another direction, and eventually he was so far successful that he made his whim for entering public life appear not unlike other bygone whims of his which had had their day and to which—wisely or unwisely—a free rein had been accorded by one who had foreseen that they would exhaust themselves. And then, as he knew that the surest way of conciliating Lorna was to beg a favor of her, he deftly shifted the subject, telling her how very anxious he was that Renunciation should do well and declaring his conviction that its prospects would be immensely brightened by her cooperation.

"You won't, I am afraid, care to play with Moore, and he seems to be rather timid about asking you; but, although he doesn't say so, I can see that he wants you badly. As for me, in my capacity of joint author, I want you most awfully. Can you be persuaded?"

She was very easily persuaded, notwithstanding the preliminary refusal with which, for the pleasure of seeming to yield to entreaty, she responded. She had had many applications, she said; she did not, under the cir-

cumstances, wish to appear again at the St. Martin's Theater; she was upon the verge of concluding another engagement. Still, for Harold's sake and for the sake of his piece, she was ready to do what in her lay.

" After all," she wound up, meditatively and irrelevantly, " we don't know that you will win this election. If you don't, you will come back to us, I suppose."

" To the stage? Well, perhaps. Oh, yes, supposing everything else fails, the stage will always remain."

His intonation or a far-away look in his eyes caused Lorna's assuaged jealousy to blaze forth anew. " Harold," she cried, " is Miss Gardiner anything to you? Tell me the truth."

" She is a lot to me," he answered, laughing; " she is a ladder."

" Only a ladder? "

" Absolutely and wholly and solely that! "

" And ladders, when they have served their purpose, are kicked down."

He shrugged his shoulders, still laughing. Then he jumped up and declared that he must be off; for indeed it seemed to him to be high time. Having obtained what he wanted, he made what struck him as a well-contrived exit; yet it may be that prudence would have counseled less precipitation. For the last impression that he left upon Miss Fitzwalter's mind was one of doubt whether she had heard all that there was to hear about Josephine.

CHAPTER XIII

LILIAN UNDERSTANDS AT LAST

"WHAT is going to become of this country I'm sure I don't know!" growled Mr. Ormond, laying down the local newspaper and flicking his glasses impatiently off his nose.

Many decent gentlemen are in a similar state of uncertainty, and few perhaps would deny that the future of England at the opening of a new century is a little difficult to forecast. But the phenomenon which, more than any other sign of the times, staggered Mr. Ormond to the extent of making him feel the solid ground give way beneath his feet, was that a man who, despite bygone delinquencies and recent aberrations from conventionality, remained, after all, a Dunville and an inheritor of ancient traditions, should publicly ally himself with Home-rulers, pro-Boers, Socialists, and other rapscallions for whom the gallows provided an ending more honorable than their deserts. To act in such a manner was, according to his notions, a very great deal worse than acting upon theatrical boards, and he never wearied of saying so.

Lilian, to whom his remarks were generally addressed, did not, on her side, show how weary she was of hearing the man whom she loved thus inexorably condemned. She was very patient, and, as a rule, very silent, essaying no

useless defense and making allowance, too, for an acrimony which might not be as exclusively political as it professed to be. Her father, she knew, would never have relished the idea of her marrying an actor, though he might, after some fuss and expostulation, have ended by accepting even an actor of Harold's name; but he now evidently thought—as everybody else did—that the ex-actor and would-be member of Parliament was in pursuit of Josephine's fortune. Hence a vehemence of language prompted, not improbably, as much by sorrow and commiseration as by wrath. It was as though he had anxiously pleaded: "You see what he is! You can't surely break your heart for a fellow like that!"

Had a rejoinder been possible, she might have honestly replied that she was neither breaking her heart nor in any fear of being jilted. Notes of warning came to her from more quarters than one; even from Dick, who, in great glee over the virtual acceptance of Renunciation, confided this good news to her, and at the same time gave utterance to misgivings respecting his brother's career and intentions which were meant, as she quite understood, to prepare her for a shock. Yet her serene faith in one from whom she was temporarily severed by the force of circumstances remained unshaken. Circumstances, to be sure, were not what she could have wished them to be; but no circumstances could do away with the all-important fact that Harold loved her. And, lest anybody should pronounce the girl a downright fool, it may be pleaded for her that she was, after all, right in assuming that to be a fact. Why should anybody be laughed at for taking honorable conduct as a matter of course? One

must grow old before one can learn what a queerly incongruous thing human nature is, and by that time one is, or ought to be, past laughing at simplicity.

The process of Lilian's education, however, was not to be much longer delayed. Enlightenment came to her one autumn afternoon when she was overtaken in a lane near her home by Lady Gardiner's cobs, and when her ladyship, who held the reins, pulled up to hail her.

"Haven't seen you for a month of Sundays!" her fat friend called out. "Now you must come back with me and have a cup of tea, if only to show that difference of political opinion need never alter friendship. Jump in; there's lots of room."

There could not very well be lots of room for anybody to sit beside Lady Gardiner, although the gentleman who had been enjoying that privilege, and who now stood, hat in hand, on the road would not, perhaps, have objected to a squeeze. But his offer to walk the rest of the way was accepted without hesitation.

"Yes, you may as well," the old lady assented. "Do you good to stretch your legs, and we sha'n't beat you by more than ten minutes or so. I have been exercising the dogs and trotting Mr. Dunville round on visits of ceremony," she went on, explanatorily. "The idea, I believe, is that he produces a rather more favorable impression upon the well-to-do when he is accompanied by me. They don't so much fancy Josephine, who hustles and bewilders them, though she gets on splendidly, it seems, with farmers and agricultural laborers and that sort."

Lady Gardiner's incidental coupling of farmers with agricultural laborers gave the measure of her electioneer-

ing knowledge; but indeed the part that she had taken in the coming contest was as slight as her interest in it. Harold, holding Lilian's hand and gazing eloquently into her eyes, said as much as could be said in the presence of a third person, but was a shade too apologetic. Surely it was rather for her to offer apologies on her father's behalf than for him to excuse himself on the ground that he had been too tied and bound of late by the chain of his obligations to do anything he wanted to do! Lilian, moreover, despite emphatic assertions to the contrary, had an intuition that he did not really wish her to go to tea at the manor.

But all this was the affair of a minute. Bowling onward presently in the low phaeton, with Harold already hidden from view by a turn of the road, she threw off that fugitive suspicion and remarked laughingly to her neighbor:

"I should get into deep disgrace at home if it were known there that I had accepted hospitality from the enemy."

"Oh, that be bothered!" returned Lady Gardiner, easily. "I'm nobody's enemy, I'm a neutral, if ever there was one, and I washed my hands a long time ago of Josephine and all her works. There's Anne Dunville, who professes to be an antediluvian Tory, and may be one for anything I know or care. She and I don't think of allowing a stupid election to cause any coldness between us."

Lilian observed that Anne, even if unable to support her brother, would probably not be very sorry if he were to win. "And he is going to win, isn't he?" she added.

"So they say," answered Lady Gardiner, talking through a yawn; "but I am not much in the way of hearing. Captain Desborough is making himself popular, I am told."

She changed the subject, speaking only of dogs and horses until she reached her own door, when she said, abruptly and apropos of nothing. "He isn't much good, you know, that candidate of Jesephine's."

"In what way do you mean?" Lilian asked.

"In no way, my dear. At least, that's my impression of him, which I give you for what it may be worth. Do you remember my telling you when he first came down here that he struck me as being short of something, though I couldn't quite say what? Well, he's short of it still."

"And are you still unable to say what it is?"

"H'm! I might arrive at a definition perhaps if it were worth while; but why should I take the trouble? I'm neither maid nor widow, so I can't be tempted to marry him. The woman who does marry him won't draw a prize, I suspect; but of course that's her lookout."

Lady Gardiner waddled toward the library, casting off, as she went, superfluous wraps, which an attendant footman picked up. Josephine, seated comfortably in front of the fire, with a novel in her hand and the tea-table at her elbow, glanced round to say:

"I hope you have had good sport, in the sense of having drawn all your coverts blank." Then, recognizing her mother's companion, she rose, exclaiming, with uplifted brows, "Hullo, Lil! This is indeed generous and pretty of you! I wasn't sure that we were still upon speaking terms."

LILIAN UNDERSTANDS AT LAST

" Some people," observed Lady Gardiner, while she sank into a deep chair and signaled to the two Schipperkes to establish themselves upon her capacious lap, " can afford to be generous. Some people know that at least they aren't making themselves publicly absurd with their whims and fancies. Oh, I don't say it to put you out of conceit with your candidate, my dear; I leave that part of the business in his own capable hands. All I mean is that you mustn't credit Lilian with magnanimity; for she doesn't care a brass farthing what freaks any of you indulge in—and quite right, too! I overtook her on the road and whisked her into the trap. The candidate follows on his ten toes and ought to be here presently."

Josephine laughed. Her mother, who often amused her, never put her out of temper, and she herself was not wanting in magnanimity. Perhaps she felt a little sorry for the vanquished rival whose rivalry had never in her eyes been at all formidable; for nothing could have been more friendly or more kind than her reception of Lilian. She did not on this occasion patronize the girl, but made her sit down by the fireside, complimented her upon her very becoming costume, and hoped that it was not indiscreet to beg for some information about Captain Desborough.

" It isn't every day, you see," she explained, " that I get a chance of questioning somebody from the opposite camp, and our own camp stories are not altogether to be relied upon. But by all accounts he must be a decent sort of person."

It may have been, further, because the truest kindness

is sometimes cruel that as soon as Harold made his appearance, Miss Gardiner took some pains to demonstrate the completeness of his allegiance to her. By the familiarity of her address, by interrogative looks and whispered asides, by numerous trifling gestures and changes of voice she compelled him to tell a tale which not even Lilian could fail to read; while he, being ill at ease, played into her hands. The situation, in truth, was not one which lent itself to a display of Harold's peculiar gifts. No one knew better than he how to cajole women; but then he liked to deal with them singly. He could not now venture to run all the risks involved in snubbing Josephine, who would instantly have detected his motive, and whose own motive for behaving as she did he partly guessed; so he saw nothing for it but to accept the part assigned to him and try to look less disconcerted than he felt.

Self-respect, which imposed a similar effect upon Lilian, enabled her, but only just enabled her, to keep a smile upon her lips and the tears from rising to her eyes. The race to which we belong is an ignoble one, composed only in an infinitesimal degree of honorable men and women. Such as it is, the best has to be made of it, and it seems probable that even the worst of human beings are not altogether bad. But not in youth does one arrive at a conclusion so dispassionate or at the species of resigned acquiescence which it entails. The one thing clear to Lilian was that the man whom she loved had deceived her, and if it was likewise clear to her that he loved another woman, this error in diagnosis was doubtless due to the fact that she could not help continuing to love him. Cruelly though she had been treated, she did not set him

down as a mere fortune-hunter; which was, for her sake, a pity, inasmuch as, had she done so, she might at once have begun the cure of her malady by despising him. What was immediately requisite was that she should maintain an unconcerned front, and in this she was moderately successful. Conversation went on; she took her share in it, resolved not to hurry away, though longing for release; that, as a matter of fact, she betrayed herself both to Josephine and to her kindly old hostess was scarcely her fault, for her secret had been more or less known to them beforehand.

After tea a summons was sent to Sir Joseph, who, it seemed, was anxious to confer with Harold respecting a great meeting which was shortly to be held in the nearest large town, and while the two men were laying their heads together apart over a bundle of papers which the elder had carried in under his arm, Josephine took occasion to make one of those startling remarks upon which her reputation as a person of much originality was based.

"I wonder," said she to Lilian, "whether you know how extraordinarily pretty you are. One would suppose that you must if one were not aware that any amount of self-deception as to personal appearance is possible in both directions. However, if you do know, you can't have the heart to quarrel with a monkey-faced, tow-headed creature like me."

"Quarrel with you?" echoed Lilian, too taken aback to respond with polite contradictions. "But do I look as if I wanted to quarrel?"

"You do, rather, and small blame to you! I am a firebrand in a quiet neighborhood; if it were not for me, your

Captain Desborough would have a very much better chance than he has, Mr. Dunville would never have come forward, and—things generally would have worked themselves out with a good deal less of storm and stress. Don't quarrel with me, though. Women who haven't beauty are bound to go in for having something else; but it's no race, really. Beauty wins at the finish. Not in every contest, I grant you; but in almost all that signify."

"Josephine!" said Lady Gardiner, opening her eyes, which had been closed in incipient sleep.

"Yes?" answered her daughter, interrogatively.

"I don't pretend to be half as clever as you are; but I almost think that, if I were in your place, I should be clever enough to hold my tongue."

Josephine, with her head slightly inclined to one side, had the air of giving this advice due consideration, and Lilian thought the moment appropriate for rising to take her leave. She had to shake hands with Harold; but, in doing so, she avoided his eyes, while a long-drawn sigh, which escaped him at the moment, failed to produce its intended effect upon her. "How gladly I would if I could! But don't you see that until the election is over I can't?" was what he wished it to signify; but she merely understood him to mean that he had made an unfortunate mistake in fancying that he was in love with her, and that he was sorry for it.

Sir Joseph, who accompanied her into the hall, at first wanted to order a carriage to take her home, and then offered her the escort of a servant. When both proposals were laughingly declined, he remarked, in his hurried, hesitating way:

"Yes, yes, young ladies aren't afraid of the dark now; they aren't much afraid of anything, it seems to me. Times have changed since I was young. Although, to be sure," he added, "there are some respects in which times never change. The same old story over and over again, isn't it? Men and women want what they can't have and what, nine times out of ten, they wouldn't like if they got it. Nine times out of ten, I do believe. But there are second strings—plenty of second strings, you know. I collect stamps myself."

He broke off, plucking at his ragged whiskers and blinking nervously. The human sympathy that was in him, though so grotesquely inarticulate, touched Lilian, who, as soon as she was out in the cold night air and could let her tears flow without restraint, felt grateful to two very kind-hearted old people. It was a little humiliating, of course, that the truth should be so manifest to them; but what was that in comparison with the humiliation of having bestowed her love upon a man who was only embarrassed by the gift? Looking back, it seemed to her that she had been insanely, inexcusably mistaken from start to finish. She remembered how Harold had on many occasions exhibited signs of alarm and accused herself, with burning cheeks, of having made love to him against his will. No doubt he had been attracted by her, and he had said the sort of things to her which men do say to girls by whom they happen to be attracted, but which only idiots take seriously. And now it was almost certain that he must know what even Sir Joseph and Lady Gardiner had so easily discovered! So she stumbled along the dark lanes, a most wobegone little person, to whom the

possible existence of " second strings " might well seem an ironical form of comfort. Yet, had she but known it, Miss Josephine Gardiner had unintentionally done her a very real service, while Harold himself, with equal lack of intention, was to render her a still greater one in the sequel.

Harold, meanwhile, was not at all pleased either with himself or with Josephine. He hated always to have his hand forced, and although, at the point to which matters had come, it seemed an indispensable part of the program that he should eventually marry Miss Gardiner, he thought it very ungenerous of her to lay his intentions bare under Lilian's eyes, as she had done. Sir Joseph did not return to the library, and when Lady Gardiner had fallen sound asleep, with dropped jaw, he interrupted a rapid checking off of doubtful voters whom Josephine believed that she had lately converted to ask:

" Doesn't it sometimes strike you that we may be counting our chickens before they are hatched? "

" When you say ' we,' " she returned, scrutinizing him rather sharply, " do you allude to me and to yourself in particular? "

He nodded: " Just so; to you and me."

" Oh! Then all I can say is that you had better not speak for me until you know what chickens I expect. Disappointment, anyhow, wouldn't leave me without plenty of compensations and alternatives. But as for you, you have just *got* to hatch this brood! You are past the parting of the ways; you can't indulge any longer in the drifting that is so dear to you—— "

" How do you know that drifting is dear to me? "

"As if you didn't betray your love for it at every turn! It is true that you also betray your talents at every turn, which makes some amends. However, as I was saying, you can't afford to lose heart. If you don't carry the election, where are you?"

"Where, indeed!"

"Carry it, then. You can, if you choose to exert yourself, and when once that has been accomplished you may go far. I think myself that you will go a very long way; for Parliaments, and even ministries, are made up of ordinary men, and you are not an ordinary man. You only want a start to forge ahead of your competitors in a few strides."

What utter nonsense this was he did not for the moment perceive, his ears being too agreeably tickled by her flattery for analysis of it. He reverted to his accustomed good humor, dismissed Lilian from his mind (half thankful for, half provoked at Josephine's superb superiority to jealousy), and——

"Don't dig the spurs into me," he pleaded, laughing; "I assure you I'm running for all I'm worth. You know why I'm running at all."

"I hope I do," she returned; "I hope I have managed to imbue you with ambitions which ought to stand in no need of spurring. I am not sure," she went on, meditatively, "whether you meant to say a rather impertinent thing or not just now, when you accused me of counting my chickens before they were hatched; but, if you did, it was foolish of you. You had better not do it again."

He made the reply that she expected him to make, for

she had, to a great extent, if not altogether, taken his measure long ago. On the other hand, he had not taken hers with anything like sufficient accuracy to venture upon a less subservient tone than he adopted; and thus he missed an opportunity of considerably augmenting her interest in, as well as her affection for, him.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW NOT TO DO IT

As the date of the election grew near the spirits of Captain Desborough's supporters brightened. Victory they scarcely ventured to anticipate, in the face of many adverse circumstances and forces; but they were going, they hoped, to run the rival candidate close. Desborough was a cheery, energetic fellow, still young, and possessed of a knack of ingratiating himself with his hearers, which Mr. Dunville, though a far better speaker, seemed somehow to lack. Then, too, there was a perceptible, instinctive feeling throughout the electorate (fostered, of course, by Harold's opponents) that a Radical Dunville must be something of a renegade. His principles and his program probably appealed to the majority, who happened to have local, as well as national, reasons for dissatisfaction; yet it was evident that they had no great liking for him as an individual, and that without the Gardiners he would have had little chance of inducing some of them to vote for him.

Just before the nomination day Harold took up his quarters at an hotel in the principal town—the rectory being, as he and his friends felt, no longer a befitting place of sojourn for him—and immediately afterward it became his duty to address the largest Liberal gathering

that had as yet been called together. He was a little nervous when, on the appointed evening, he walked across to the public building which had been engaged for the purpose, but not very; for he had his speech at his fingers' ends, and Sir Joseph Gardiner, who, with other influential personages, accompanied him, scented triumph in the air. Hitherto their orator, talking for the most part to stolid rustics, had had scant occasion of doing himself justice; but now they were presenting him to a better educated, more intelligent audience, and reporters from the London newspapers were waiting to take down his winged words. He might at least be expected to produce a more serious impression upon serious people than Captain Desborough, who, on the previous evening, had delivered a sort of familiar schoolboy harangue, and had wound up by calling upon the assemblage to sing Rule Britannia.

While a way was being forced for Harold through the densely crowded hall, he caught sight, not a little to his dismay, of a very smartly dressed lady who nodded and waved her hand to him. He had the presence of mind at once to stretch out his own, for Miss Fitzwalter, whose eyes were glittering, was better conciliated than ignored in moments of excitement, and he could not imagine what had brought her down from London. Holding her hand he smilingly inquired, and in half-defiant accents she replied:

"Well, as this isn't a packed meeting, I'm entitled to attend it, I suppose; so I thought I would gratify my curiosity. It's always pleasant and instructive to see you in a new part."

" Awfully good of you to take such a lot of trouble to witness such a poor performance," Harold rejoined; " but I wish you had told me you were coming, instead of making your way in with this beastly crowd. Of course, you must join us on the platform now."

It was adroit of him to meet her in that spirit, and he could see that she was pleased. Whether Sir Joseph, whom he hastened to introduce to her, was pleased was another question, and what Josephine, already seated on the platform with the very few local ladies who represented Liberalism, thought of the new arrival was yet another; but no alternative course had seemed safe to him. At least Lorna, in her present position, would have to behave herself, whereas in one of greater freedom and less responsibility goodness only knew what she might not have done or shouted!

Dimly, amid the cheers called forth by his appearance and the hearty greeting accorded to him by his supporters, Harold became aware that a chair had been found for Miss Fitzwalter at Josephine's elbow, and that a somewhat animated conversation was taking place between the neighbors; but it is difficult to do more than one thing at a time, and he had to concentrate his attention upon the task immediately in hand. Introductory remarks from Sir Joseph, delivered in the simple but telling style habitual to that old hand, were very well received, as was also the candidate, when he advanced to the front of the platform. His exordium, which had been carefully prepared, produced a favorable impression, and his condemnation of the existing ministry seemed to command the assent of the audience; but be-

fore he had proceeded much further, various interruptions warned him of the presence of a hostile section. Some laughter, for instance, was provoked when, at the end of a well-turned period, a loud-voiced person called out from the body of the hall:

"You've missed your way, guv'nor; theater's 'tother side o' the square!"

"If," retorted Harold, "my friend imagines that I am ashamed of having been an actor, he is much mistaken. I yield to no man in my respect for the dramatic profession, and I may add that to my mind all methods of earning a livelihood are honorable."

The clapping of Lorna's hands behind him scarcely made amends for a prompt rejoinder of "Devil doubt you!" from his unabashed assailant or for a renewed outburst of guffaws. He went on with his speech and acquitted himself creditably, upon the whole, sometimes disregarding jeers, sometimes replying to them with perfect good humor; but he did not once, and he knew very well that he did not, contrive to get upon terms of sympathy with those who listened to him. His discouragement, although he was able to conceal it, was profound; he felt that his oratory, notwithstanding its ease and polish, did not, somehow, "come off"; that rude preliminary criticism struck him as precisely hitting the mark. He had mistaken his way; he was a comedian, not a platform speaker; he was attempting something which was perhaps easy enough in itself, but for which he was qualified neither by nature nor by training. He was, moreover, rendered uncomfortable by consciousness that two women whom he had not at all desired to bring to-

gether were whispering to one another at his back. What were they talking about? There were so many things that he would rather they didn't talk about!

Mr. Harold Dunville's speech, as reported in the papers of the following morning, read excellently. It certainly conveyed no idea of having been a failure, nor was it exactly a failure; yet those who were present in the hall had to acknowledge to themselves that it fell a little flat. To experienced observers it was plain that the audience was prejudiced rather against than in favor of the candidate by his name and by the local associations belonging thereto. Radicals themselves, they could not without distrust accept a Dunville as holding Radical views, and one or two significant intercalations betrayed their suspicion that he was an adventurer. Possibly he was too glib, possibly he did not appear to be sufficiently in earnest. It is always hard to say what will or what will not cause a large assemblage to "take to" a rhetorician; but the signs of their not having taken to him are unmistakable, even when they cheer and rattle their sticks and umbrellas on the floor, as they did when Harold resumed his seat.

Sir Joseph Gardiner extended a limp hand and said, in level accents which betrayed disappointment: "I congratulate you, Mr. Dunville; you expressed yourself with great lucidity."

Josephine was more frank and less polite. "A most excellent lesson in the art of how not to do it!" she exclaimed, impatiently, while Harold helped her to put on her jacket. "Anybody who can manage to pick holes in you or your performance will have to be a clever man;

and I suppose that is why everybody was so visibly bored. I myself should have been bored to the verge of tears if it hadn't been for Miss Fitzwalter's conversation, which was most amusing and—informing. Please do not bother about seeing me off, but go and eat. If you are half as hungry as I am you must be faint for want of food. After all, nothing consoles one for the sacrifice of one's dinner, does it? Nothing, anyhow, that one is in the least likely to get, it seems."

Harold, making no rejoinder, refrained from following her immediately, as she descended from the platform. He was a good deal nettled, and he was also desirous of having a few words with Lorna, whose smile increased his irritation.

"I wonder," said he, with an intonation which Lorna knew from of old, and which never failed to frighten her, "in what way you contrived to make your talk with Miss Gardiner so informing. There are, of course, lots of things which you may have mentioned to her, and which it would have been very amiable and helpful on your part to mention."

"I didn't!" the poor woman protested, her smile fading and quick tears rising into her eyes; "I give you my word I didn't! I only told her that we were old friends, and that we had always acted together, and—and all that. Don't be angry with me! You must know, surely, that I wouldn't for the world do you an injury, even if I could."

Harold jerked up his shoulders. "Then all I can say is that your object in coming here to-night seems rather obscure."

"I came," Miss Fitzwalter confessed, in one of those truthful outbursts which were not uncommon with her, "because I wanted to see for myself how the land lay. I wasn't satisfied with what you told me in London; you tell me so little! Oh, I'm distrustful and suspicious, I own; you know best whether I haven't some right to be. But as far as Miss Gardiner is concerned, my mind is at ease, and I sha'n't trouble you with any more intrusions like this. Harold—— "

"Well? "

"If you think she is serious, you are making a mistake. She isn't! To her you are only a new toy, and I am not sure that you aren't already a broken toy. You certainly will be unless you are elected, and my own impression is that you are not going to be elected."

"Thank you very much indeed," returned Harold. "Considering that I have staked everything upon the result of the election, your prophecies and your evident wishes are encouraging in the highest degree."

"Would it be wonderful that I should wish you to be sent back to me—to us? But I do honestly wish you success. When have I ever wished anything else for you? I only warn you that Miss Gardiner isn't serious. Some day, perhaps, you will recognize who your real friends are."

The above dialogue was carried on in a surging, swaying crowd. It was brought to an end at this point by the involuntary separation of the parties to it, who were swept asunder as they drew near the entrance of the hall, and presently Harold found himself once more at Josephine's elbow. With one foot on the step of her

phaeton, she was bidding a knot of bare-headed bystanders good-night.

"My father?" Harold heard her say. "Oh, I'm sure I don't know. Gone home in the brougham, I should think. At any rate, I'm not going to wait for him or anybody else in this cold wind."

The cobs, who had no doubt been kept waiting a good deal longer than they liked, appeared to share her sentiments. With staring coats and ears laid back, they stamped and fidgeted until the groom left their heads, when with one consent they sprang forward, dragging the reins through their driver's fingers. They had broken into a gallop before she could get them in hand, and were charging across the market-place, scattering the crowd right and left. Shouts and shrieks arose on every side; one man was caught by the pole and sent flying. The groom, left standing upon the pavement, ejaculated stupidly, "Good Lord!" and off went Harold at the top of his speed in pursuit.

It was bad luck for him that he was unable to overtake the vanishing equipage, but worse luck still that it should have fallen to another's lot to effect a rescue which could not but evoke the applause of the populace. For who should be standing upon the steps of the Conservative Club, as Miss Gardiner was whirled helplessly by, but Captain Desborough, R. N. And by whom was the tradition of being ever ready to succor beauty in distress more sure of maintenance than by that handy man? Captain Desborough, strong in the arms and as active as a cat, boarded the phaeton in a hop, skip, and a jump (somewhat unceremoniously displacing its occupant),

and, when once he had got a firm grip of the reins, the cobs, who were only fresh and out of temper, not really frightened, made prompt surrender.

"I beg your pardon," Captain Desborough said, as soon as he had brought them to a standstill; "I'm afraid I must have given you no end of a dig in the ribs with my elbow, didn't I? But there wasn't much time, you see. You might have fouled a lamp-post and been shot out, head first, at any moment."

He was a pleasant-looking fellow, with a broad, smooth-shaven face, clear eyes, and white teeth. Josephine, who took a fancy to him at once, thanked him very heartily for his timely assistance.

"And I can't," she was pleased to add, while she readjusted her hat, "regret this John Gilpin exhibition of mine, since it has been the means of making us acquainted. Enemies though we are, it won't be possible for you to cut me now, after having saved me from being smashed up, will it?"

Captain Desborough replied in the style that was to be expected of a gallant (in every sense of that adjective) officer, and when Harold arrived, panting, upon the scene, the first thing that he heard was his opponent's willing acceptance of an invitation to luncheon at Dunville Manor on the morrow. Harold himself was not over and above graciously received. He was requested not to "make a fuss," although he had made none; his offer to drive Miss Gardiner home was declined without hesitation and without thanks; his denunciations of the groom's clumsiness in having left the horses' heads too soon were interrupted by a curt "Oh!

it was nobody's fault but my own. Stand clear, please."

Then, as her servant had by this time come running up, and had climbed into his seat, away went Josephine, with a parting smile and wave of the hand which were obviously not meant for the Radical candidate.

The two political rivals, thus left face to face, could do no less than exchange civil greetings, while one of them thought himself bound to say something complimentary and appreciative to the other. The whole scene had, of course, been witnessed by a large number of spectators, some of whom raised a cheer in honor of Captain Desborough, and presently Harold started to walk back to his hotel, feeling that an evening which had opened inauspiciously had come to an almost disastrous conclusion.

That local Conservative journalism would make the most that there was to be made out of the above episode was only what might have been foreseen; but it was certainly most unfair to describe it as it was described for the benefit of readers the next morning. Under the rather offensive heading of "SPLENDID PLUCK! OUR FUTURE MEMBER SAVES THE LIFE OF A RADICAL LADY," an account was given of Josephine's mishap which not only magnified the heroism displayed by Captain Desborough on the occasion, but more than insinuated that Mr. Dunville had shown himself the reverse of a hero. Mr. Dunville, it appeared, had not cared to attempt the risky leap so successfully accomplished by his adversary; he had confined himself to running after the runaways, and had, as a not unnatural result, been distanced.

"May we not regard this in the light of an omen that he will be left equally far behind in another contest which awaits decision? Mr. Dunville's somewhat colorless address to his supporters last night seems to confirm the impression we have had all along of him, that his heart is but faintly in his work. Where his heart may be we do not pretend to say; but he may take our word for it that nothing worth winning in this world is ever won by lukewarmness or timidity. Were it our business or our desire to offer sound advice to this singular scion of a good old Tory stock, we should recommend him to take a leaf out of his opponent's book. *Fas est ab hoste doceri!*"

It was with the echo of these spiteful remarks in his memory that Harold drove out to Dunville Manor—being careful, of course, to defer his visit until an hour at which lunching guests might be expected to have taken their departure. He went thither prepared for a snubbing reception; so that he was agreeably surprised to find Josephine quite good humored. She had been enjoying herself very much, she told him, with Captain Desborough, whose breezy talk had been the more pleasant to listen to because he had candidly owned in the course of it that he did not anticipate victory.

"He says it is two to one on us, and I should think he is about right. All the same, you were horribly disappointing last night, with your platitudes and your admirable elocution. You almost made me despair of you."

"I am afraid," said Harold, "I must plead guilty to having done my best."

"Do your worst, then, next time, and you will obtain more satisfactory results. Of course these people don't know what to make of the sort of thing that you and Miss Fitzwalter consider your best. Miss Fitzwalter, by the way, seems to think of you in superlatives. May I ask whether you mean to let her go on following you about?"

"I most sincerely hope she won't," Harold answered; "but how was I to prevent her from turning up at a public meeting?"

"Not knowing precisely how you stand with her I can't say; only she struck me as having the elements of a possible encumbrance in her. Deeply enamored of you and flatteringly disposed to be jealous of me, she gave me to understand."

"She gave you to understand that!"

"Oh, not of set purpose; but her sentiments were rather thinly veiled. You may thank me for having preserved you from a scene which I am sure you wouldn't have liked by intimating that I didn't think much of you. As a matter of fact, I did *not* think much of you at the moment; so my task was easy. Ah, and that reminds me that she made me think ever so much more highly of you by mentioning that you had written an extremely clever play, which is to be produced soon. Why have you kept that achievement dark all this time?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have kept it dark," answered Harold, "if I could have guessed that I should go up in your esteem by announcing it."

"Oh, you go up immensely—quite immensely!

You know my opinion of actors, especially English actors; but to be able to write a play is—well, it is to be somebody. Tell me all about it at once."

He told her something about it, while she listened with unfeigned interest, nodding at intervals and putting in brief, approving comments, as though she had been a skilled judge of such matters. He omitted to divulge the authorship of the play, covering this suppression of the truth and quieting his conscience by the remark that it was all more or less of a secret for the present. The important thing just then was that he should recover ground with Miss Gardiner, which he had evidently lost, and, since she chose to offer him this somewhat irrelevant method of so doing, he gladly profited by it. It likewise occurred to him as opportune to take this occasion of stating how anxious he was to obtain Miss Fitzwalter's professional collaboration.

"I don't want to offend her, you see, and that was why I took the liberty of bringing her on to the platform and introducing her to you," he explained. "Actresses are always apt to be umbrageous, and she is worse than most of them in that way, though in others she is a good creature. Of course what you said just now about her being enamored of me is all nonsense."

"I should have thought you would have discovered by now that I never talk nonsense. She is unquestionably in love with you, if it mattered—which it doesn't. It might have mattered if you had been at all in love with her; but that seems to come scarcely within the limits of possibility. You had better warn her off, though, unless you have already done so."

Thus superbly did Miss Gardiner dispose of one whose claims upon Harold's gratitude and affection were somewhat more deeply rooted than she imagined. Waving the subject aside, she turned to that of practical policy.

"You will have to alter your style, which is altogether too literary. You want to use shorter sentences, hit hard when you get the chance, and drop that air of good-tempered superiority. Although I shouldn't wonder if the events of last night had cost you some votes, we have still a margin to draw upon, I believe. Only it won't do to make any more mistakes."

Harold listened and laughed a little and promised obedience. "Stick to me," said he, "and you will pull me through. I rely, as I have done from the outset, exclusively upon your good offices."

CHAPTER XV

THE CHOICE OF THE DIVISION

"WELL, what news?" inquired Anne Dunville, when the rector came home to tea on the polling day, after having voted in consonance with his duty and convictions.

"Oh, we're beat," answered Dick, dropping into an armchair and stretching out his legs, "pretty handsomely beat, they tell me. For the matter of that, we never expected to win, you know."

"Some of us," observed Anne, while she poured out the tea, "weren't particularly eager to win, I suspect. You, for instance, appear to take defeat cheerfully."

"I can't pretend that I shall regret it," Dick owned. "On public grounds the loss of a seat is of small importance to us at the present time, and on private grounds—well, I suppose I wish Harold to be returned."

"Aren't you sure?"

"How can I be sure until I know what the sequel is to be? And even then——"

"I take it that the sequel is a foregone conclusion by now; everybody says that it is as good as announced. Not that all this advertising of herself with him would deter Josephine for an instant from throwing him over

if she felt inclined; but, as matters stand, only disappointment is likely to give her that inclination, I should say."

Dick nodded and sighed, gazing pensively at the glowing fire.

"Now, I know just what you are thinking," his sister pursued; "but really it is absurd and out of place to have such thoughts about a man like Harold. What difference do you suppose that it would make a year hence if he were as passionately devoted to Josephine at this moment as he isn't? He may make an excellent average husband, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if he did; but that can never come to pass as a result of his being in love with his wife. And he will certainly love being rich."

"Yes," agreed Dick, with another sigh, "very likely he will; although I don't believe he is mercenary. Then, too, one may assume that he, or rather his son, will eventually inherit the old place, which should be a matter of rejoicing for us. But—to tell you the truth, I wasn't thinking so much of him."

Without superfluous inquiry as to what or whom her brother had in mind, Anne rejoined: "It's a mere question of time. Be patient and generous enough to allow her a little time."

But Dick shook his head. "Perhaps I know her better than you do," said he. "At any rate, I know—I wish I didn't!—that she loves him."

"Lilian can't have told you that!"

"Of course not; but I couldn't be more certain of the fact if she had told me. She is bearing it as bravely

as possible; she doesn't give me the faintest excuse for condoling with her; only I am afraid she is breaking her heart. Like her neighbors, she expects from one moment to another to hear of Harold's engagement to Miss Gardiner; but, unlike her neighbors, she acquits him of sordid motives. She believes, in short, that he cares for Miss Gardiner and that he doesn't care for her. Which, as you know, is not the case."

"She will be none the worse off for believing it to be the case."

"Ah, but won't she? All depends, you see, upon whether Harold really loves her or not. Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that he does?"

"He doesn't in any sense worth considering; but what then?"

"Well—then Captain Desborough would have my very best wishes, in addition to my vote."

Anne, who had got up to give her brother his tea, remained standing in front of him, with her hands on her hips.

"Do you know, Dick," said she, "that sort of thing makes me feel rather ill. Self-abnegation is all very fine up to a certain point, but it loses its beauty when it is carried to such grotesque lengths. Now you needn't trouble to say what you are going to say, for I can hear it all before you open your lips, and, as your premises are false, your conclusions can't be worth listening to. Firstly, Harold wouldn't marry Lilian if he lost the election; it stands to reason that he wouldn't have money enough left. Secondly, he would make her quite miserable if he did marry her, for he would tire of her in a

few months. Thirdly and lastly, she must know in her heart that he is not fit to black your boots."

"My dear Anne," protested Dick, looking up, with a laugh, "are you so little acquainted with your sex as to imagine that there would be the least relevancy in that 'lastly' of yours, even assuming it to be true?"

"I am acquainted with Lilian," Anne returned. "You say you know her better than I do; but I make so bold as to doubt that. Oh, I grant you that she has been bewitched; it is a great pity, of course. Nevertheless, she will get over it, and sooner than you suppose, perhaps. Give her time, I tell you. I hope and believe that she will be my sister-in-law yet, though she will never be Harold's wife."

Anne's prophesy, at which Dick smiled, as being kindly meant, despite its inherent absurdity, might have been partially confirmed by Harold, had he been distressed by overhearing it; for indeed he did not see how Lilian Ormond could possibly become his wife. That impossibility had been recurring to him at intervals during the last few busy days and had robbed sundry small triumphs of all their zest for him. In affairs of the heart he was always prone to mourn over the impossible, while the probable as invariably scared and repelled him. He was destined—more and more irrevocably destined, he perceived—to be Josephine's husband, and the prospect, apparently upon the very brink of fulfilment now, smiled less and less at him. All his natural instincts, reenforced by a half-conscious self-knowledge, rose up and waved him back from irrevocable steps. However, he was, as he kept on reminding himself, "in for it this

time," and his misgivings, after all, were but intermittent.

On the polling day he was quite happy, driving about the constituency on a drag which one of Sir Joseph's wealthy friends had brought down from London for the occasion. Cheers and waved hats saluted him throughout his progress; Miss Gardiner, on the box seat just in front of him, was made the recipient of ovations which might perhaps be interpreted as bearing a double significance; he began to feel the species of elation which had hitherto come to him only when, at the end of a thoroughly successful performance, he had stood before the curtain, bowing to a mass of upturned faces, white and misty beyond the glare of the footlights. One can not in this world have everything; but it would be something, surely, to be jerked up into public life, official life, celebrity of an entirely fresh order. And then some day to be Dunville of Dunville Manor, as his forefathers had been! Almost he persuaded himself that he was playing a truly heroic part and that the old Dunvilles from their niches in the family vault should be applauding him for his splendid abandonment of their political principles, as well as of his own little personal inclinations.

And when evening came, his supporters had a flattering tale to tell him. The urban portion of the constituency had, according to their information, done rather better for him than had been anticipated, and with regard to the outlying districts they were full of confidence. The estimate of the least sanguine was that he would be found to have left his Conserva-

tive antagonist a couple of hundred votes or so behind him.

"Which," remarked Josephine, complacently, "is all we want and more than we need. I don't mind confessing now, strictly between ourselves, that I have had some qualms of doubt latterly. Not so much about the discontent of the division with Tory rule as about you in your personal capacity. If you had been beaten I should have been furious with you, because I should have felt that it was all your own fault."

"And may I hope," asked Harold, smiling, "that, since I have not been beaten, you are the reverse of furious with me? May I hope—— "

She checked him quickly. "Oh, I can't tell you what you may hope for or what you may not until the result is declared at noon to-morrow. But so long as your aspirations are not too extravagant, I should say that you will have a very fair chance of seeing them fulfilled from the moment that you are entitled to add M. P. to your name."

She spoke, so far as he could judge, with intention and comprehension. She was evidently pleased with him, as well as exultant, and these combined emotions were so becoming to her that nobody just then would have dreamed of pronouncing Miss Gardiner a plain woman. Harold, too, was pleased and exultant. To win can not, under any circumstances, be otherwise than pleasing, and if Josephine must be regarded as the price of victory, there was no denying that in the eyes of most men she would have figured rather as its reward.

Sad and silent were Captain Desborough's friends

that night, while the counting of the votes went on, and although encouraging rumors from the more distant parts of the constituency caused their spirits to revive a little the next morning, the utmost that they dared to hope for was a close finish. Mr. Ormond, who called at the rectory, on his way to hear the result announced, and who offered Dick a lift in his dog-cart, did not expect even so much as that.

"Desborough has worked like a man," said he, "and we've all done our level best; but the fact of the matter is that we weren't as prepared as we ought to have been. Moreover, we had to contend against those rascally Gardiners, with their money-bags. It's the long purse that is bound to win nowadays."

"Wasn't that rather apt to be the case in the old days?" asked Dick.

"Well, perhaps it was—oh, yes, I dare say it was. Only in those days, you see, the purse was in the right hands instead of the wrong ones. Which makes all the difference."

Dick laughed aloud. Presently he remarked: "It is a good many generations since the purse has been in the hands of the Dunvilles, anyhow."

"And do you relish the notion of its coming into their hands this way, sir?" demanded Mr. Ormond, red and gobbling. "Are you by any chance proud of your precious brother?"

"I am not ashamed of him," answered Dick, quietly.

"Then, my dear Dunville, I can't help telling you that I think you ought to be. I quarrel with no man on account of his convictions," declared Mr. Ormond (who

never failed to quarrel with those who did not share his own); "I can understand there being such a person as an honest Radical, though I don't believe there ever was a wise one. But I do despise a fellow who sells himself for gold!"

"But have we any right to assume that Harold is doing so?"

"Well, he doesn't appear to me to make much secret of the circumstance. It's pretty well understood, isn't it, that he is going to marry old Gardiner's daughter?"

"I don't know; but if he were, it wouldn't follow that he was selling himself. The question is whether it is just or fair to condemn him for having his own opinions and his own tastes."

"Oh, excuse me, my dear Dunville," returned the old gentleman, tartly; "that isn't the question at all, and I think you know it isn't."

The Reverend Richard, than whom nobody knew better that that was not the question, held his peace. Poor old Mr. Ormond had very good reasons for being sore and angry, although he had put forward others less irrefutable; the mischief that Harold had done with a light heart could never be undone, perhaps. Spectators, meanwhile, were powerless.

Spectators in thousands thronged the streets surrounding the Town Hall, which building Mr. Ormond entered, Dick preferring to remain outside in the dog-cart. Plenty of hats were touched and some rough hands extended to the parson, whose popularity was as wide as the county.

"Well, sir," said one burly farmer, "I've voted

same as yourself, I expect, though this here Gov'ment ain't done much for the likes of us, nor never will, so far as I can see. But I dunno as I shall be much sorrier than you if the young gentleman gets in."

"*He's* in all right," growled another, "and a good job, too! No more Tories for me, thank 'ee. Farmers' friends, indeed!—wolves in sheep's clothin', *I* calls 'em!"

A lean, cadaverous personage in a long black coat and tall hat, whom Dick recognized as one of the pillars of local non-conformity, volunteered the information that he had departed from the principles of a lifetime by recording his suffrage in Captain Desborough's favor.

"We frequently 'ear it said," he remarked, oratorically, "that we oughter vote for measures, not men. I tell you, my friends, that that is a pernicious fallacy. Let alone that there's no dependence upon what I may call 'alf-'earted promises of disestablishment, I look to the fact that our elected member represents ourselves in the councils of the nation, and I, for one—I care not *who* 'ears me say it!—I, for one, will never willingly be represented by a godless play-actor."

"Cap'n Desborough's a sportsman and a good feller," somebody else observed. "Free-handed, too, from what I can learn. Don't know so much about t'other, nor yet I don't know what money he's got to spend. I'm for Desborough myself."

Most of them, Dick gathered, were for Desborough, although the general opinion seemed to be that they would find themselves outnumbered. Nobody, save the Methodist, appeared to care very greatly who won, nor

was the result in its political aspect alluded to with much interest. Only, it was noticeable that—in contradiction with forecasts—those who sported the Radical colors were almost exclusively townsmen. Had Harold, after all, failed to commend himself to a class which, despite grumblings and mutterings, remains instinctively Conservative at heart? If so, his victory could scarcely be assured.

But assurance, one way or the other, was imminent, and while the observant rector was forming conjectures from the faces and voices around him, the big clock in the market-place struck noon. Immediately afterward the window above the entrance of the Town Hall was flung open, some half dozen figures appeared upon the balcony, and then, in an instant, arose a roar and hubbub from the assembled multitude which caused Mr. Ormond's mare to plunge wildly. By the time that Dick, who was holding the reins, had induced her to stand still, a huge placard was exhibited before his eyes, for the sight of which his neighbors' shouts had prepared him:

DESBOROUGH, 5,372,
DUNVILLE, 5,198.

A somewhat narrow majority out of an unusually full poll; yet, taking all the circumstances into consideration, a decisive one. Dick and others, whose calculations were thus shown to have been completely at fault, could but stare and ejaculate, "Who would ever have thought it!"

Captain Desborough, addressing his constituents in

stentorian accents, frankly avowed that he, for his part, was surprised, as well as grateful. He had hoped for nothing more, he confessed, than to make his friend Mr. Dunville gallop, if he might so express himself. Conscious of the disadvantages under which he labored as a stranger in those parts, he regarded his election not so much in the light of a personal compliment—which indeed he had no right to expect—as of what was far more satisfactory to him, a proof that the division reposed unabated confidence in a ministry which, etc., etc. He would only add that it would be his hearty endeavor to show himself worthy of the high honor conferred upon him, that he intended to make his home in the neighborhood, and that it was a great pleasure to him to recognize the spirit of fair play which had characterized the struggle from start to finish.

This little oration, especially that part of it which referred to the new member's future place of residence, was received with loud and prolonged cheers. Harold, who followed, was less successful, although he spoke much better and said, in graceful language, the sort of thing which it is customary for a defeated man who has kept his temper to say on such occasions. He must deprecate, he declared, the explanation suggested by Captain Desborough's modesty. He preferred, on the contrary, to think that of two strangers—" for I must, unfortunately, plead guilty to being a stranger among you, notwithstanding the place of my birth "—they had chosen the one best qualified to attract and retain their sympathies. That choice he must be permitted, on public grounds, to regret; but perhaps he might also be per-

mitted to congratulate himself and those who had worked so indefatigably for him on the fact that they had reduced by a considerable number of votes the Conservative majority in a division hitherto obstinately opposed to the cause of progress. His supporters, he felt sure, would not be discouraged by defeat; his own conviction was that, had they been provided with a better candidate, they would at that moment have been rejoicing in a victory.

"Oh, you had to say something—you had to say something," was Sir Joseph's remark, as Harold withdrew, to an accompaniment of applause, not unmingled with laughter. "I don't think that, if I had been you, I should have said exactly what you did say; but perhaps it doesn't signify much."

Perhaps it did not signify at all; perhaps nothing in connection with this unforeseen reverse signified beyond the dismal certainty that it had occurred. Harold, who was not much accustomed to reverses, was moved toward that despondent view by the behavior of the volatile Josephine. Her glance at him, as he approached the spot where she was standing, talking and laughing, with a few of her friends, expressed neither displeasure nor condolence, only a sort of amused curiosity.

"How funny of you to proclaim in public that you were no good!" said she.

Then she resumed the conversation which his advent had interrupted for a moment. "Apparently it was the rustics who threw us over, after all. I should wonder why, if it were ever worth while to wonder why one has lost a game. The reasons wouldn't be far to seek, I dare

say; only I really take so little interest in the game of politics that I doubt whether I shall meddle with it again in my life. Too tedious, too monotonous, too generally unremunerative! Let's play at something else now."

And, on being asked what fresh form of amusement and excitement she had to suggest, she replied carelessly: "Well, I was rather thinking of Monte Carlo for the rest of the winter; there's the music, you know, and the human comedy, in addition to the tables. But I haven't had time to make up my mind yet."

To Harold, who escorted her down-stairs, where Lady Gardiner was waiting for her in an open carriage, she said, without a trace of disappointment or resentment: "I suppose you, too, will have to find some other outlet for your energies after this tiresome little breakdown. When and where is the new play to appear?"

He answered rather gloomily that he could give her no definite information upon that subject as yet. "I have been rather busy wasting my time down here of late, you see."

"Ah, yes, to be sure! That is so unfortunate, isn't it? But mind you let me know as soon as anything is settled, for I want to see your piece. Possibly Heaven may have meant you to be a brilliant playwright; I don't think, somehow, that Heaven can have designed you for an M. P."

Harold, after she had been driven away, said to himself, with no little bitterness, that it looked uncommonly as though the intention of Heaven had been to make a fool of him. His dreams had been dispelled; he had spent, or would shortly be called upon to spend,

almost the whole of his small fortune; he had flung his professional prospects to the winds; he had all but jilted the girl whom he loved, and now he was obviously threatened with being jilted in his turn. "With the best will in the world," he muttered, "one could hardly contrive to be a bigger fool than that—or to look a bigger fool, either!"

The smart of looking a fool was, for the moment, even sharper than that of being one. It spurred him, at any rate, to a determination that Miss Gardiner should not throw him over without his consent. Hang it all! he had never failed with women yet. If he was good for nothing else, he did at least possess the trick of winning their affections, and so far he had scarcely exerted himself to win Josephine's. Almost he persuaded himself that he must be a little in love with her, so eager was he to gain what she seemed to be under the impression that she could so easily deny him. Moreover, he was quite sure that he was thoroughly in love with the idea of recovering the old home. He had made—or so he told himself—immense sacrifices for that idea; he could not and would not now tamely admit that they had been made in vain.

CHAPTER XVI

A GOOD LOSER

"THE evening papers have just brought us the news of your defeat," wrote Shepherd to his former patron and *protégé*, "and I suppose that in common courtesy I ought to say I am sorry to hear of it. But as I can't say so in common honesty, courtesy must go to the wall. Westminster, I imagine, will be able to rub on more or less respectably without you, whereas I really doubt sometimes whether the contemporary stage can. Anyhow, I have something beyond a doubt as to whether this theater can. Renunciation, I am sorry to tell you, shows signs of perishing unborn. Moore, who funked his part from the first, now declares that he will never manage to make it go, and he is determined not to risk a fiasco. Rather than do that, he says he will pay forfeit (though we could not legally claim one, I fear), and revive an old piece, which might run for a couple of months or so, giving him time to work up some fresh production. I shall be much disappointed if your play falls through; for I think better and better of it myself, and I know who could make its success as assured as any theatrical venture can be. Pray consider the situation,

and let me hear from you as soon as possible. Of course I am quite in the dark with regard to your plans for the future; but it occurs to me that you may, under present circumstances, have some thought of returning to the boards, and in that case a splendid opportunity would now lie open to you, I believe. The combination of author and actor is so rare that this in itself would probably suffice to fill the house for many weeks, and Moore, I am certain, would be only too glad to meet you halfway. You may depend upon it that he will agree to any arrangement that you can see your way to propose. Let me, as an old friend, take the liberty of impressing upon you that such a chance as this is most unlikely ever to present itself again in your lifetime."

The above missive, which, with many others, reached Harold on the morning after the election, brought the color into his cheeks and a sparkle into his eyes. It was almost like the offer of a fortune to a ruined man, and his first impulse was to telegraph joyful acceptance to his correspondent. But on reflection he decided not to act quite so hastily as that. He was going, of course, to see Josephine, and it would certainly do no harm to pay her the compliment of consulting her. It was, however, in the last degree improbable that she would attempt to dissuade him. Calling to mind her parting words on the previous day, he perceived that Fortune was favoring him in a sense unsuspected by Shepherd, that nothing was more likely to take Miss Gardiner's restless fancy than the picture of a playwright rescuing his own piece by assuming the part in it which was declined, as too difficult, by his fellow actors, and

that her interest in him—so perilously and avowedly diminished—was susceptible of being rekindled by other and perhaps surer methods than those which he had contemplated.

With a serene countenance, therefore, and with a genial cheerfulness which everybody admired, he received the numerous visits of condolence which kept him occupied throughout the morning, and more than once was he congratulated upon being "a good loser." It remained to be seen, thought he to himself, whether he was a loser at all. Personally, he inclined to believe that he might gain by his loss; for he was confident of scoring a triumph in Renunciation, whereas he had feared from the outset that the House of Commons might have pitfalls in store for him. Besides, it was something that he could now present himself at the manor with an air of independence which would have been impossible had he been returned as member for the division. For in that event his first step must perforce have been the humiliating one of requesting pecuniary assistance from Sir Joseph. The hired conveyance which took him at a later hour from his hotel toward Sir Joseph's residence may have symbolized his fallen estate to wayfarers who turned their heads to stare at him as he passed through the streets, and who had recently seen him perched upon a more imposing equipage, but he himself had no sensation of having been worsted. Rather did he feel like one who has recoiled in order to leap the farther.

No sooner had he entered the manor domain than he overtook a stout lady, enveloped in furs, to whom the

driver touched his hat, and who, in acknowledgment of the salute, called out, sharply:

"Mind what you are about with that star-gazing brute of yours! You'll be over one of my dogs presently, and then you'll be prosecuted with the utmost severity of the law, I can tell you!"

Harold, jumping out, dismissed the fly and made his bow to Lady Gardiner, who nodded to him.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said she, speaking in short gasps—for the weather, though gray and misty, was mild, and she was somewhat too heavily clad for pedestrian exercise. "Sounds inhospitable, I'm afraid, but I can't help wondering *why* it's you! I should have thought you would have been off to London by the first train in the morning, like Josephine."

"Is Miss Gardiner in London?" asked Harold, visibly dismayed.

"Don't know, I'm sure; I forget at what hour the boat-trains leave. But she was to be on the Riviera tomorrow, unless she decided to stay a day or two in Paris, where she has friends who would be glad to put her up. One blessing about Josèphine," continued Lady Gardiner, musingly, "is that she always has friends everywhere to put her up and chaperon her. It saves a lot of bother; because of course she would go anywhere she wanted to go whether she had friends on the spot or not. Tell me, do you notice a difference in Chatterbox's figure? I do hope it is only want of exercise; but servants are so careless, and it would be too tiresome if any mishap had occurred!"

Too preoccupied with the mishap which had occurred

to himself to reply, Harold bit his lip in silence. Presently he faltered out: "I—I suppose Miss Gardiner wanted to go to the Riviera."

"Well," answered the old lady, with a laugh, "I suppose she wanted to get out of this. That's always her way when things don't come off. She doesn't sit still and cry over spilt milk; she simply drops the subject and makes some fresh start. It isn't a bad plan, you know."

"A most excellent plan," agreed Harold, rather grimly. "The only quarrel I have with it is that I happen, on this occasion, to be the dropped subject."

"Ah, just so! But didn't you know that you were sure to be dropped unless you headed the poll? That's why I took it for granted that you would have left the neighborhood. It seemed like the natural thing for you to return to your cabbages at Covent Garden—or is it Drury Lane? I am so vague about theaters, for I never enter them nowadays. Can't stand the heat and the squash."

Lady Gardiner's words did not sound very polite; but her manner showed that she had not the least intention of being offensive. As usual, she was merely giving frank utterance to the thoughts that were in her mind, and upon the same simple principle she continued:

"I dare say you think that Josephine is treating you with scant ceremony, after having made so much of you all this time. Well, it cuts both ways; nobody need feel bound to stand upon ceremony with her. And I'll tell you another thing which may help to soothe your wounded vanity, Mr. Dunville; her bolting off in such hot

haste is a sort of a compliment to you. Shows, I mean, that she doesn't look upon you as a sheer nonentity, in spite of your being a failure. One doesn't run away from nothing."

This apparent hint (which was not in truth meant to be a hint, but was merely the result of Lady Gardiner's fundamental good nature) caused Harold to prick up his ears and take courage. There were things which he would have liked very much to say to Josephine; but his being debarred from saying them need not prevent him from bringing all the eloquence of an accomplished fact to bear upon her, nor perhaps would it prove to his disadvantage in the long run that he should seem to accept dismissal. He pictured her drawn back unwillingly, but irresistibly, to London from the Riviera by reports of his triumph; he foresaw in his mind's eye a return not less significant than her flight. What he clean forgot, in his sudden ardor to run down an elusive quarry, was that his affections were engaged elsewhere, and Lady Gardiner's next remark—whether by chance or by design—recalled that circumstance to him after a fashion which he did not like. She said:

"Now that this worrying election is a thing of the past and that old Mr. Ormond must be rubbing his hands over the result, I shall be allowed to see a little more of my friend Lilian, I hope. One of the nicest girls I know, taking her all round. A trifle old-fashioned, if you like; but none the worse for that, by my way of thinking. Is she going to marry your brother?"

"Good heavens! no, I don't think so," answered

Harold, starting. "What put such an idea into your head?"

"Somebody—was it Josephine or was it your sister, I wonder?—told me that it was upon the cards. It wouldn't be a brilliant match for her, of course, and he isn't in his first youth. A good sort, though—your brother, I mean—and I shouldn't be surprised if she had sense enough to realize that brilliancy is a poor substitute for the solid domestic virtues which one wants in a husband. Yes; all things considered, I shall congratulate her upon having made a wise choice if she decides to take him. Won't you come in and have a cup of tea? I dare say Sir Joseph is somewhere about, if you want to see him; but there isn't much for you and him to say to one another now, is there?"

The invitation was not so cordially given as to tempt Harold; who answered: "Oh, no; there is nothing further to be said. I only called to take leave of you on my way to say good-by at the rectory; for, as you expected, I am returning to London at once."

Lady Gardiner held out a fat, soft hand. "Well, good-by. Sorry for your disappointment; but somebody must be disappointed in every contest, and you might, after all, have found Parliament a bore. *I* should, I know! My love to Anne. By the way, I wish you would ask your brother to come up and take a look at Chatterbox; he knows as much about dogs as anybody."

Shortly afterward Harold delivered the first of the messages with which he had been charged. The second he was unable to give, his brother not being at home.

"Shooting over at Beechwood and thoroughly enjoying himself, I hope," Anne announced, with a certain complacency which irritated, and was perhaps not wholly innocent of intention to irritate, her hearer; "but he ought to be back soon, now that the light has gone. So Josephine has decamped already, has she? I told you she would."

"Did you?"

"Something to that effect, anyhow. And now what are you going to do?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders. "Follow her example, I suppose. Having put down my stake and lost my money, it only remains for me to walk off, whistling, with my hands in my empty pockets."

"Ah, your pockets are pretty empty by this time, no doubt," remarked Anne, with a not unkindly laugh; "but—whistle and I'll come to you, my lad! My resources, as you know, are limited; still, for the first time in my life, I have some capital to dispose of, and if you are in want of a loan, I'll accommodate you on easy terms. For the present, my income amounts to rather more than I know how to spend; so you need not hesitate."

Harold was both surprised and touched. "Upon my word, that's awfully good of you, Anne!" he exclaimed. "Although I am not going to borrow of you, and although, as a matter of fact, I believe I shall pull through all right, I am really grateful to you for thinking of it. All the same," he could not help adding, "I suspect the reason of your offer was that you were afraid I contemplated a raid upon Dick. Ah, I see by that truth-telling

countenance of yours that I have hit the mark! Well, you are mistaken; I am not quite what you think I am, Anne."

"Oh, I know what you are," Anne declared; "I know as well as possible what you are—though *you* don't! Come to me when you want help; don't apply to people who will demand exorbitant interest in one form or another. I have a sort of a weakness for you, Harold, and I think that must be because, in spite of my gray hair and my wrinkles and my ingrained spinsterhood and all the rest of it, I am a woman. I don't think it is because I am your sister."

"Oh, no, it can't be that," Harold agreed, smiling. "You are rather emphatically Dick's sister, aren't you?"

"Just so. As long as you refrain from poaching upon Dick's preserves we sha'n't quarrel, you and I."

Dick's preserves! That Lilian Ormond should be thus spoken of was scarcely to be endured, nor was it credible that she should already be willing to accept such a designation. Harold was upon the point of saying something very ill advised when he was checked, rather dramatically, by the entrance of the two persons whose conjunction so offended his mental vision. They stepped in, side by side, smiling and fresh-colored from the sharp outer air, evidently in high spirits and announcing that they had brought with them replenishment for the larder. If, on recognizing Anne's visitor, one of them became abruptly grave, the other looked as pleased as he proclaimed himself to be. Was that be-

cause he had no longer anything to fear from his defeated and rejected junior?

"Hullo, Harold!" he cried; "delighted to see you back again! You have come to stay now, I hope."

"I have come," answered Harold, with a mild melancholy, suitable to the occasion, "to wish you all good-by. It is about time, don't you think so?"

In the conversation which followed, and to which Lilian made but few contributions, he played to perfection the part of one who meekly accepts dismissal and bears no malice. He was so sincerely sorry for himself, so genuinely persuaded, for the time being, that the Fates had treated him with exaggerated asperity, that an attitude of contrition was almost forced upon his audience. Dick, in particular, seemed to feel bound to apologize for what had happened, and even went the length of apologizing for his own hostile vote.

"But to tell you the truth," said he, "my conviction was that if I had had a hundred votes, I might have given them against you without affecting the result. From what I can hear, nobody expected things to go as they did; Desborough himself certainly didn't. Well, at any rate, you made a good fight, and there's no disgrace in being on the losing side. I can't see why you should want to turn your back upon us in such a hurry."

Did Lilian see why? She must, at all events, have been rather dense, had she failed to understand the motive which Harold so delicately and discreetly, yet persistently, insinuated for her benefit. Yet she made no sign, save once, when allusion was made to the hurry in which Miss Gardiner had been to turn her back. Then

she glanced up quickly, and for an instant her eyes met Harold's, but were promptly averted. It was really no easy matter for him to judge whether he was making any impression upon her or not; but he began to think that he was—and so did Anne, who was growing visibly impatient.

Presently the parlor-maid came in to say: "Mrs. Coppard is at the door, sir, and wishes most particular to speak to you for a minute, if it wouldn't be putting you about too much."

Dick rose at once with a sigh. "The old trouble, I suppose," he remarked. "Coppard is a brute, but he has a shrew for a wife. If she begins shouting me down, I shall send for you, Anne; she has a wholesome awe of you, and she isn't a bit afraid of me now, worse luck!"

Lilian got up at the same moment, but was induced by the rector's protestations to resume her seat.

"Oh, please don't go before you have had your tea!" he begged. "I sha'n't enjoy mine unless you stay, and I don't mean to be detained more than a minute or two by this irate old parishioner, who threatens to hale her husband before the magistrates regularly once a week."

Presumably, however, it was no such easy matter to get rid of Mrs. Coppard; for at the expiration of fully ten minutes, during which Harold behaved in such a fashion as to exasperate his sister, the anticipated appeal for help was conveyed to Miss Dunville, whose presence in the study was urgently requested.

"Oh, bother!" muttered Anne, while she prepared to obey the summons. And then, raising her voice,

"Lil," said she in desperation, "do you think you can manage to entertain Harold until I come back? You won't find him very heavy on hand if you will talk to him about Josephine Gardiner. She is his only subject just now, as I dare say you know."

That Parthian dart was of little avail. As soon as the door had closed behind his anxious sister Harold remarked, smiling sadly: "I dare say you know that that subject, to which I was bound to pay a good deal of attention while the canvassing went on, hasn't much intrinsic interest for me. There's another subject which does interest me above everything, and I should like to talk about it if I might do so without offense."

"I don't think you will offend me," said Lilian.

"I hope I sha'n't; but—well, after all, I believe I would rather take my chance of offending you than be kept any longer in suspense."

It needed some audacity on his part to ask point-blank whether there was any truth in current reports which coupled her name with his brother's; but Harold, in his relations with the opposite sex, was nothing if not audacious. He repeated the substance of what he had heard from Lady Gardiner, made passing reference to Anne's undisguised wishes, and wound up by avowing that the mere rumor of which he spoke had given him "a horrid pang."

"For," said he, "although I know you like and admire Dick as much as we all do, I can't think that you love him."

"Anybody," returned Lilian, without loss of composure, "might love your brother, and any woman who

may marry him will be extremely fortunate; but of course the rumors that you have heard are all rubbish. He and I have been friends too long to trouble ourselves about them, even if they should spread, which I should think is unlikely. As far as that goes, there have been rather wide-spread rumors about you and Josephine Gardiner."

"Oh, inevitably! But *you*, at least, haven't taken them for more than they are worth, I trust."

"I don't know what they are worth," Lilian answered, looking him straight in the face, "but it seemed to me that you were doing all you could to encourage them."

He had the readiness to plead guilty at once. A very powerful temptation, which at moments had almost assumed the semblance of a duty, had been presented to him, he said, and he had dallied with it. "That is just the sort of fellow that I am," he confessed, in an outburst of candor; "I hate committing myself; I am always putting off decision until I see what is going to happen. First and foremost, I wanted to win the election—a thing I couldn't have done without submitting to all that Miss Gardiner demanded, or appeared to demand—and I didn't look much beyond that. Perhaps, if I had won, I should have proposed to her, in the hope of restoring the manor to the family. I can't say whether I should or not; nor can I tell whether she would have accepted me or not. What I do know for certain is that success would have made a miserable man of me for the rest of my days."

This was quite sincerely said, and it had the effect

upon his hearer which truth, in no matter what guise, must needs produce upon those to whom it is spoken. When Lilian was asked whether she did not consider him a very despicable being, she replied that his description of himself did not make him out a very trustworthy one; yet her softened expression and intonation seemed to intimate that he might, for all that, be a lovable one.

He was not slow to perceive and press his advantage. He rejoiced, he declared, in the defeat which had given him back his liberty; he did not even regret the heavy pecuniary loss which was one of its accompaniments; he would have to set his shoulder to the wheel once more, that was all, and he knew he had it in him to earn as much as he had thrown away ere long. Then, while he was expatiating blithely upon the chances of the future, and while her smile encouraged him, he had the unhappy inspiration of confiding to her that he had written a play which, as he hoped, would bring him both fame and fortune.

"Oh!—*you* have written a play?" Lilian asked, in a rather odd voice.

"Yes; a thing called Renunciation. It is upon the cards now that I myself may act in it; but this is strictly between ourselves, please; I don't want it to be talked about just yet."

At this moment Anne reentered the room, with anxious, troubled eyes—Anne, whose unwilling absence, had she but known it, had been the means of removing all further cause for anxiety, so far as her younger brother was concerned, from her mind. For Lilian now knew that she did not and could not love such a man as Harold

had, by a few words, revealed himself to be. Nothing, she thought, could be more base than his declared intention of laying claim to what was not his; no charge brought against him by his worst enemy could have degraded him more irrevocably in her eyes than his own avowal had done. Her indignation may have been a trifle overstrained, and it would assuredly have amazed Harold, who, if questioned, would at once have admitted that he was not the original writer of the piece from which he hoped such great things; but her disillusionment, whether warranted or not, was complete. Infidelity to herself she had been ready to condone; treachery to Dick she could by no means pardon. She did not, however, betray her sentiments by word or look, and Harold, when he took leave of her, bore away a lighter heart than he had brought to the rectory.

CHAPTER XVII

HISTRIO REDIVIVUS

"THINK I see my way. Look me up Ashley Gardens to-morrow afternoon," was the telegram which Harold despatched to Shepherd as the outcome of the two visits that he had paid that day. Those two visits, if conclusive upon no other point, had at least freed him from all doubt with regard to the advisability of his prompt return to the stage, and that was quite as definite a conclusion as he desired. What he precisely did desire in the shape of an ultimate conclusion it would have puzzled him to say; but then it was really not yet necessary for him to know. Like a hesitating purchaser, he wanted to secure the refusal of more than one good thing, dimly prescient that when the time should come for him to make his choice, he would be very apt to regret what he had rejected. Not for an instant did the idea cross his mind that he had damaged himself with Lilian by speaking of his brother's play as his own. He had, in truth, begun to think of it as more his own than Dick's, and he had, at all events, pretty good authority for believing that by his interpretation of the piece it must stand or fall.

This was the opinion unhesitatingly expressed both by Shepherd and by Moore when they came to call upon

him together on the following day. The latter, indeed, stated in so many words that his mind was quite made up against appearing in a part which he had never relished and to which the objections, so far as he was concerned, had been rendered too glaring to be ignored in the course of the last few weeks.

"It isn't good enough, my dear Dunville," he declared; "what I am offered simply isn't good enough! Or, if you prefer to put it differently, let us say that *I* am not good enough. You can do things which I can't do, and perhaps I can do some which you haven't as yet proved yourself capable of accomplishing. However that may be, this particular part has been cut out for you, and I can do no more with it than make the best of a misfit. Well, I would rather take my chance of passing muster with the public in threadbare old clothes than incur almost certain ridicule by putting on another man's new ones."

Mr. Moore spoke with some irritation and nervousness. The fact was that his efforts in rehearsal had not been well seconded, the leading lady, especially, having been at little pains to conceal her sense of an incongruity already patent to him.

"I am sure," he added, "Miss Fitzwalter will tell you that we have made no progress, and are not likely to make any. Not that I complain of her; only it is very evident to me that she finds it uphill work."

"Miss Fitzwalter," observed Shepherd, dispassionately, "is a fine actress, but I should not call her an independent one. I have often noticed that in order to do herself justice she requires a certain stimulus which

can only be applied by certain people. She would be all right with you, Dunville, I think."

"Oh, yes, I dare say she would be all right with me," Harold agreed, laughing a little.

Whether he would be all right with her (save in the sense of being sure that she would act her very best as his coadjutrix) might be another question. He had wit enough to divine that Lorna had purposely discouraged the uneasy Moore and likewise her motives for so doing. Lorna had doubtless foreseen that what had happened was not at all unlikely to happen. There were moments when he felt half afraid of Lorna, and other moments when he was inclined to believe that she was, after all, about as good a friend as he had in the world. Anyhow, he could not allow excessive prudence to make him waver at this rather critical juncture in his career. He said, after a short pause:

"Well, I'm at your orders, Moore. Of course, it would be no end of a sell for me if the play had to be abandoned now, and, of course, it's true that the part seems as if it ought to fit me like a glove. How about letting me try my hand at it before you finally decide one way or the other?"

But Mr. Moore did not think that any trial was necessary. His decision, he affirmed, was taken and was final; it rested with Dunville to say whether Renunciation should be performed at the St. Martin's Theater or not.

"I have talked it all over with Shepherd, who knows just what I am prepared to do and who is so kind as to call me accommodating. Perhaps you and he will let

me know to-morrow which of two alternatives that I have laid before him you would prefer to adopt. For my own part, I shall be satisfied either way, and I not only wish you and your piece success but am persuaded that it is assured in advance."

With that he got up, glancing at his watch and murmuring something about an appointment. His exit had a good deal the air of a preconcerted arrangement, and as soon as he was gone, Harold remarked, smiling:

"Your turn now, Shepherd. Which alternative is it to be? I am to choose, I suppose, between being engaged at a fixed salary and renewing my lease of the theater, eh?"

Shepherd nodded. "Yes, that is what Moore suggests—or, to speak more accurately, what I suggested to him—and I am bound to add that I think he is behaving handsomely in the matter. Should the theater remain under his management, you will be paid at the usual rate and will receive what I consider a fair proportion of the takings as author——"

"Or rather, my brother will."

"Oh, your brother? I don't know, I'm sure, about your brother's share; that must be for you and him to settle between you. But as regards the main question, Moore, for many reasons, would rather that you became the lessee once more, and I believe you will consult your own interests best by meeting him there. Both pecuniarily and in the way of prestige, I mean."

"H'm!—it's a bit of a risk, you know, Shepherd. I can't tell you how much cash I shall have left after I have paid my election expenses, but there will be

precious little, I'm afraid. And if we should come to grief over this play——"

"I decline to contemplate contingencies which will not arise, and if ready money is wanted for a few weeks or months, I'll undertake to find it for you. Don't trouble your head about that. By the way, I ought to have mentioned perhaps that you will have to take me over again as part and parcel of the concern."

Harold surveyed his friend with that half-deprecating, boyish smile which had helped to win a good many friends for him, male and female. "Shepherd," said he, "do you know that you make me feel rather ashamed of myself?"

"I am glad of that," returned Shepherd, calmly, "because I think you ought to feel rather ashamed of yourself; though perhaps not for the reason that you have in your mind. Well, you have burnt your fingers, and I shouldn't wonder if you had learned a lesson or two. Now, I hope, you are going to be justifiably proud of yourself, by way of a change. It isn't every day that the public is privileged to see a man playing in his piece at his own theater. Oh, your fortune is made this time, Dunville, you may depend upon it! And I am not much in the habit of prophesying unless I know, am I?"

Harold's experience of his prophecies was, at any rate, that they were invariably fulfilled. In this case, as in other cases, he might be trusted to bring about their fulfilment; perhaps also he might be relied upon both to propitiate and—so far as in him lay—to thwart Lorna Fitzwalter.

That lady required no propitiating, nor, in the first exuberance of her joy at having attained her object, did she behave in such a manner as to excite apprehension.

"Oh, but I didn't!" she declared, some days afterward, when, on the conclusion of a very successful rehearsal, she was accused of having tried to wreck the piece. "All I tried to do was to save it from being wrecked by such a fish out of water as Moore was in the part. If you hadn't come back to us, as I hoped all along that you would, I should have done my level best to make your play go without you. You can't say that I have ever been selfish with you, and I hope I never shall be."

Harold trusted that she never would; for the probability of her altruism being put to the test by and by stared him in the face. Meanwhile, he was pleased with her, pleased with the turn that his affairs had taken, pleased above all with himself and with his facile accomplishment of a task somewhat too delicate for Moore's capabilities.

The plot of Renunciation, it may here be mentioned, was grounded upon a more or less legendary episode in the history of the Dunville family which had come to Dick's knowledge and had fired his imagination. The hero of this ill-authenticated romance was one Ralph Dunville, a roistering, dueling, gambling spendthrift who, in the early years of the eighteenth century, was driven out of the country by debt, by the incurred displeasure of high personages, and, more particularly, by the refusal of his kinsman, at that time the holder

of the estates, to have anything more to do with him. So away he went to seek his fortune in Continental warfare, leaving behind him the beautiful and disconsolate daughter of a neighboring magnate, Mistress Alice Filmer, with whom he had exchanged secret vows from which he now felt in honor bound to release her. Nothing more was heard of him, it would appear, for nearly two years, during which time the childless head of the family died and was succeeded by the heir of entail, named Walter. Now, according to the story, there was in the pedigree of this amiable, gifted, and exceedingly handsome young gentleman (the same who in later life became a member of the Newcastle administration and had his portrait painted by Sir Joshua), a flaw, unknown to him and to his immediate progenitors, but discovered by an elderly relation of his, Peter Dunville, who is stated to have acquired documentary proof thereof. Peter appears to have been a plausible, unscrupulous personage of a type happily more often to be met with in melodrama than in real life. His original idea, presumably, was to sell his information to the innocent and upright Walter, with whom he had ingratiated himself and who, as was not unusual in those days, had acknowledged the claims of consanguinity to the extent of granting him permanent board and lodging. It can only have been conviction of the predestined failure of such an enterprise that led him to open negotiations with Ralph, who, by reason of the aforesaid flaw, became the rightful owner of the Dunville estates. At all events, Ralph returned to England post-haste—returned only to find that the man who had

supplanted him in his inheritance had supplanted him also in the affections of Alice Filmer. A bundle of discursive letters, written long after all the persons concerned had quitted earthly scenes, and claiming no authority beyond that of hearsay, supplies material for the conclusion of the romance. These relate how Ralph was hospitably received by the relative whom he was bent upon ousting; how Alice, as soon as her first love reappeared, broke off her engagement to the lord of the manor; how the chivalrous soldier of fortune speedily discerned that fidelity to the past was with her a matter of duty, not of inclination, and how he thereupon determined to abandon his rights for her sake. He is represented as charming in manner, cynical in his professed views of life and conduct, resolved to make things easy for those whom he desired to benefit by persuading them that he in no way merited their esteem. Old Peter and documents which spoke for themselves remained, naturally, to be reckoned with. His first step was to obtain temporary possession of the papers and destroy them; his next was to put a public and quite unexpected affront upon his elderly accomplice which rendered bloodshed inevitable. Then, being a very pretty swordsman, he ran old Peter through the body and quitted England forever, pursued by the execrations of the reunited lovers, who saw in him only the murderer of one whom they had sincerely loved and respected.

Such, in briefest and baldest outline, was the scaffolding which had served a descendant of Walter Dunville's for the construction of a well-contrived play.

He had not found the bare facts—if facts they were —altogether easy to manipulate; he had perceived the necessity, for stage purposes, of taking some liberties with the climax, and he had taken them accordingly; but the character of Ralph he had understood and had presented with a skill which his younger brother was excellently qualified to interpret.

To Harold, indeed, the impersonation of Ralph Dunville was the easiest thing in the world. He had only to be himself in order to do it, and if he paid himself rather too high a compliment when he imagined that, under similar circumstances, he would have behaved exactly as Ralph had done, that in no way marred his imitation of a nature which from so many points of view looked like the counterpart of his own. From the moment that he stepped into Moore's vacated place all went as smoothly as could be desired. His fellow actors began at once to feel instinctively that they were concerned in a coming triumph and played their several parts with consequent zeal and life; Lorna, who alone among them had a somewhat troublesome job to tackle, surpassed herself in dealing with it; Shepherd rubbed his hands and thanked his stars that a certain division of Kent had remained stanch to the Government of the day.

Presently paragraphs, inspired by that capable strategist and provocative of the curiosity of playgoers, found their way into the columns of the newspapers. "It is whispered that the versatile Mr. Dunville has not suffered his recent unsuccessful excursion into the political arena to interfere with his wooing of the Muses,

and that a play from his pen will ere long be produced at the theater of which he has once more become the lessee. Should it prove true, as reported, that he has cast himself for the leading part in his own work, critics and audience may anticipate a somewhat unusual treat." Such, in varying forms, were the announcements communicated to the press, and an approving grunt was elicited from Anne Dunville when one of them caught her eye.

"Well done, Harold!" she cried, as she handed the paper over to the rector; "there's something in him, after all, you know. Pluck, one perceives, and talent, one hopes. Did you know he had written a play?"

"Oh, yes, I knew," answered the real author of the play, looking a little guilty. "I had a letter from him the other day, saying that he had taken the theater again and that he expected to make rather a good thing out of this new production."

That Dick had not yet admitted his sister into his confidence was the result of a queer shyness and diffidence with which she always inspired him. It was very doubtful, he thought, whether a clerical playwright would command Anne's respect or admiration, and he shrank from her irony, which was apt to be of a biting kind. Nor was he disposed just yet to make avowals which might very well await the excuse and sanction of achievement. But with the one person, besides Harold, in whom he had confided he was eager to hold parley, being assured in advance of her sympathy and congratulations. It so happened that he had seen nothing of Lilian since the election; for poor old Mr.

Ormond was in bed, paying the penalty of having drunk the new member's health, and when Mr. Ormond was attacked by a good, wholesome fit of gout in the proper quarter nobody except his eldest daughter could approach him with safety. Lilian, therefore, had for some time past been acting as a sick-nurse whose presence within hail of the sufferer was imperative at all hours; so that the rector walked over to Beechwood that afternoon to make inquiries with only a faint hope of being allowed to exchange words with her.

However, he had the luck to find the invalid progressing favorably, almost free from pain and inclined for conversation. Having been ushered into the bedroom where his stricken parishioner lay, he lent a patient ear to the long tale of mingled woe and exultation with which he was favored.

"I do assure you, Dunville, I've been enduring the torments of the d—— well, let us say of the defeated; though we were *not* defeated, thank God! That thought cheered me up in my most infernal moments. Imagine what it was like? Oh, no, you can't; nobody who hasn't had gout can imagine what it is like! Enough to make a man wish he was dead! Still, as I say, I had the consolation through it all of remembering that we had knocked the stuffing out of that precious brother of yours. And Miss Gardiner has fled the country, I hear. Ha, ha!—so much for him, eh? Serve him right, sir—serve him right! We shall get no more of the light of his countenance in our parts, I take it, and between you and me I doubt whether anybody whom he has left behind him misses him much."

Lilian, sitting in the background, held her peace. It was impossible to tell by looking at her whether she missed her departed admirer or not, and the deprecating glances which Dick threw in her direction from time to time met with no visible acknowledgment. But, to his great joy, she followed him out of the room on the conclusion of his visit, and the moment that they were alone, he said:

"Well, it's all right about Harold's play. He is going to act in it himself, as I hoped at the first that he would."

"So I see by the papers," she answered. "I don't know why you call it his play, though; I don't know why *he* calls it his play. He has no right to do that."

"But I told you that, as a favor to me, he had agreed to put his name to it. You speak as if you thought his doing so made him an impostor."

"Exactly what I do think," said Lilian.

"Then let me tell you that you are most unfair and unjust to him. The play is really in a great measure his, seeing that he has adapted it for the stage in a way that I couldn't have done, with my lack of practical experience. Moreover, it is a distinct advantage to me that it should not appear anonymously. As for the pecuniary side of the question, he writes to offer me terms which in my opinion are only too liberal."

"Oh, I don't suspect him of designs upon your pocket," said Lilian, disdainfully; "there are other kinds of treachery than that."

No doubt there are, and it was difficult to acquit

Harold of treachery in a different relation. Nevertheless, Dick was so afraid of being himself a traitor that he made haste to return: "I still think that you are rather unfair to him. I don't mean about the play, with regard to which he has simply done what he was asked to do; but——"

"But what?" inquired Lilian, in a tone of voice which evinced somewhat less respect for her spiritual adviser than usual.

He could not possibly finish his sentence. All he could say—and this he deemed it incumbent upon him to say—was that he felt sure there was nothing in current gossip respecting his brother and Miss Gardiner. "It was natural that he should be supposed to be paying his addresses to her, as well as to the constituency; but he could hardly help that, and—as your father says, she had fled the country."

"I wasn't accusing him of infidelity to Josephine," Lilian returned; "on the contrary, it seems rather as if she had been faithless to him than as if he had thrown her over. Either way, it is no business of mine."

There was a suppressed eagerness in Dick's voice which did not preserve him from giving deep offense, as he asked: "-Are you certain of that?"

"Quite certain," she answered, steadily. And after a moment she added, in lower accents, "I don't think you are very generous."

Not generous! when, for the sake of conscience and honesty, he had gone out of his way to espouse his rival's cause! The Reverend Richard Dunville was under the impression that he knew something about

women, and indeed if he did not know a good deal about his female parishioners, the fault was not theirs; but the displeasure which was now so legible upon the countenance of one of the least recalcitrant of these puzzled and almost angered him.

"Well, well, I'll say no more; I am sorry if I have said too much," was his extremely unintelligent rejoinder. And, lest he should be betrayed into further indiscretions, he incontinently took to his heels.

CHAPTER XVIII

LAURELS AND WILLOWS

On Christmas morning, Miss Lilian Ormond received, among other seasonable greetings, a letter so charmingly worded, so respectfully affectionate, and so modest in its plea for a corner of her memory, that she could hardly have failed to be touched by it, had she not known that it came from the pen of a skilled comedian. But persons of a simple and direct character, like hers, are protected by their ignorance of the complexities of average human nature from being imposed upon by those whom they have once ceased to trust, and Harold's plausible missive convinced her of nothing except of his insincerity.

Yet he had never been more sincere in his life than he was when he sat down to indite to the girl whom he loved best a Christmas appeal which, read between the lines (as it was evidently meant to be), amounted to an appeal for pardon and patience. He repeated the substance of what he had said to her by word of mouth on the occasion of their last interview; he alluded to the election and to everything connected with it as a passing episode upon which he looked back with regret, not unmingled with shame. "What an idiot I was, and what an idiot you must have thought me!" he interjected.

Then he went on to speak hopefully of the near future, and of the approach of the day when he should once more be a humble capitalist. His correspondent, in short, was given to understand that he had something to tell her which he was only restrained from uttering forthwith by scruples which did him no discredit. He added that his play was to be produced soon after the new year, that it was likely—so competent judges assured him—to give him a great lift in his profession, and that he would be honored and overjoyed if the one person whose approval was worth more to him than that of all the critics in London could be present at the first performance.

"Would that be manageable, I wonder? And would you think it worth while? I only venture to mention that there will be a place for you in the box which is reserved for my brother and sister, who are coming up, and that I can answer for their being delighted to take charge of you, if you should care to accompany them."

Lilian was too indignant at what she considered the impudence of such an invitation to perceive its obvious innocence. How could he dare to suggest her visiting the theater in the company of his defrauded brother, who might, at any moment, give him away? He must indeed feel sure of having won her love, he must indeed place implicit reliance upon the discretion of his dupe, if he was not afraid to take that risk! But that, after all, was his affair, and he had, as a matter of fact, already been given away. Not, assuredly, in order to spare him possible humiliation would she be absent from a performance which she greatly longed to witness, but

for the more prosaic reason that the demands of Mr. Ormond's large family—always painfully heavy at that time of year—precluded her from putting in a request for journey-money. She tried to console herself by reflecting that perhaps the spectacle of Harold's stolen triumph would have spoiled for her the pleasure of assisting at Dick's unclaimed victory.

Shortly after emerging from church, however, she was accosted by the rector, whose bright and eager face lent such support to the whispered request he had to make that she could neither pain him by a refusal nor by a renewal of observations which had already brought them within perilous reach of quarreling. Of course, she would like very much to assist at the first night, to which he was looking forward, and if—as he assured her was the case—Anne had set her heart upon being allowed to pay all expenses for this once, it would be churlish, perhaps, to raise objections.

"Between ourselves," the rector added, "I don't mean Anne to be out of pocket; I expect my own pocket to be stuffed full of checks before long, and then I hope she won't mind my repaying her. But, as she doesn't know what my glittering prospects are, and as I don't want her to be told yet, I am giving her a happy Christmas by accepting her offer. Won't you be equally kind?"

Lilian had a smile and a frown at his service. "Yes; only I can't understand why Anne should not be told, even if everybody else is to be deceived."

"Because—oh, well, among other reasons, because Anne has a disconcertingly keen sense of incongruity.

I believe she does me the honor to cherish a certain admiration for me as a parson; I doubt whether she would be able to bring an unprejudiced judgment to bear upon my merits as a playwright. Let me at least get her to applaud the piece before I make my humble confession."

Anne was quite predisposed to applaud the piece. A little less inclined, perhaps, to give Lilian an opportunity of appreciating Harold's versatile genius; still she was too good a sister to demur to the wish which Dick had expressed. Accordingly, she confirmed by word of mouth the representations already made on her behalf, and Mr. Ormond, when approached upon the subject, gave a somewhat grudging consent to his daughter's departure on leave of absence for a few days.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," the old gentleman growled; "but I don't see what you want her for, and I don't see why she should want to go. However, I can't deny that she has earned a holiday."

Thus it came to pass that the audience which, on the occasion of Mr. Harold Dunville's new production, packed the St. Martin's Theater from roof to basement, and which adequately represented fashion, letters, art, and contemporary criticism, included three persons who appeared to represent nothing in particular, except themselves—although that, to be sure, may, from various causes, have implied a good deal to the destined hero of the evening.

It was never Harold's habit to play to or at anybody, his histrionic gift consisting precisely in the power that he had to forget, while he was acting, everything

but the personality which he had assumed and the fictitious scenes belonging thereto; yet on that evening he was conscious throughout of Lilian's presence and bent upon conveying to her the idea that he had never revealed his true self more clearly than in the character of the ancestor with whom he fancied that he had so much in common. And almost he succeeded. His acting was really fine; his part was one which, in the nature of things, captivated from the outset the sympathies of those who saw and heard him; he dealt with it after a fashion which moved them to alternate laughter and tears. If Lilian, whose pocket-handkerchief was called into frequent requisition, could not help feeling that, in order to play like that, the man must be in some measure what he so convincingly appeared to be, her intuitions may not have been wholly at fault. Who can tell what latent potentialities for good or for evil exist in any of us? Yet when the curtain fell, amid thunders of applause, on the conclusion of each act, and when the spell was temporarily withdrawn, she reverted obstinately to ascertained facts. Harold Dunville might be this, that, or the other—he was a magnificent actor certainly, and an engaging, lovable being possibly—but that he was an impostor was beyond all doubt or question. Nor was there any longer the least doubt or question in her mind as to whether she herself loved him or not. Precisely because she had loved him once, it had become an altogether impossible thing to her to love him again, and perhaps her distrust of him was rather deepened than diminished by this proof of his power to stir her emotions. Then, too, Dick's enthusiastic, unrestrained

delight in his brother's triumph provoked her. Dick was triumphant, Dick was radiant; but not on his own score. He might have been, as he pretended to be, making acquaintance with the play for the first time, so little did he seem to claim any personal share in its immense success.

"Isn't he glorious?—isn't he a real genius?—doesn't he deserve the ovation that is in store for him?"

To such eager ejaculations Anne was fain to respond with acquiescent nods and smiles, honestly owning that she would never have believed that Harold "had it in him"; but Lilian contracted her brows and drummed impatiently with her foot. It was right enough to praise an admirable performance, and she was willing to pay her tribute of admiration to a performer who knew so well how to profit by a great opportunity. But who, after all, had furnished him with that opportunity?

"I don't think the author ought to be forgotten," she could not resist remarking once.

"Bless me! who forgets him?" returned Anne. "I suppose we all knew that Harold could act; but the amazing thing—at least it's amazing to me—is the knowledge of human nature he must possess to have composed such dialogue. Oh, we are clapping our hands for the author quite as much as for the actor, you may be sure!"

A slight nudge and an imploring glance from Dick closed Lilian's lips; but she promised herself that they should not remain permanently closed. Let Harold speak out soon, if he had the courage and honesty to

do so. If not, the task of rendering justice where it was due must be undertaken by somebody else.

Critics more dispassionate than Miss Ormond and more experienced than Anne would probably have pronounced—most of them did, indeed, pronounce in print on the following morning—that it had needed all Mr. Dunville's consummate skill as a comedian to achieve victory with a play which, in other hands, might easily have led to disaster. Miss Fitzwalter, to be sure, had surpassed herself in a somewhat ungrateful part, while the other members of the company had done their very best; but the fact remained that Renunciation, although an excellent piece of work, exhibited many of the faults which belong to amateur writers for the stage. With such appreciations, however, the course of this narrative has little to do. A victory is a victory, whether it be won by adherence to recognized rules or bold departure from them, and that Harold proved completely victorious no critic could attempt to deny. In the final scene he fairly brought down the house, which wept over him and adored him as he lay wounded to death, his head supported by the woman whom he loved, and gasped out his life, with light words upon his lips, laughing to scorn the malicious story of his rascally kinsman. For the author had perceived that, in the interests of poetic justice, he must be made to perish by the sword of the villain, instead of running the latter through the body, that he must die in the presence of those for whom he had sacrificed all, that he must win their affection and regret, without any suspicion on their part of the truth, and that the villain must be cast out, enraged and dis-

comfited, after a last vain and spiteful effort to wreck their happiness by proclaiming what he could no longer substantiate.

The conclusion, of course, left something to be desired, and did not wholly satisfy the claims of poetic justice, as understood by a public which likes to see everything cleared up before the curtain drops; yet it harmonized aptly enough with a character and a life which had been presented with great dexterity—besides being the only imaginable solution of the imbroglio. No doubt the striking personal beauty of the chief actor was of assistance to him. Seldom did Harold Dunville appear upon the stage without touching some susceptible hearts, and on this occasion it is probable that most of the female spectators were more or less in love with him. One of them, it is true, was not; but her immunity was due to special causes, and even she had to acknowledge to herself that if his actions had been anything like as handsome as his face, her dead sentiment for him would never have died.

When all was over he received an ovation which eclipsed every previous experience of his in that line. Vainly, if chivalrously, did he insist upon drawing Miss Fitzwalter before the curtain with him and compelling her to associate herself with his glory. Recalled again and again, he was at length fain to step forward alone; and then, in response to vociferous demands from the gallery, he resigned himself, with a smile and a slight, deprecating shrug, to the utterance of a few words. These were few, simple, and modest. As a general rule he was averse, he said, to the delivery of speeches by

managers or actors, his feeling with regard to that question being that when satisfaction had been given on the one side and expressed on the other, so happy a state of things could not be improved upon by talking about it. He must admit, however, that the present instance was in some respects exceptional, and perhaps he should not be mistaken in assuming that one reason for the very great kindness and generosity with which he had been met was the circumstance that his name happened to figure no less than three times on the playbill of the evening. But let him hasten to confess that that circumstance, though exceptional, added little to such merit as he might be deemed to have displayed. " I do not know whether it is necessary to mention—to some of you, I am sure, it can not be necessary—that the writer of a stage play is often a rather nebulous, rather incapable personage. Be that as it may, I must not allow you to go away with the idea that Renunciation is the product of my own poor brains alone. I am precluded from specifying by name those to whose ability and cooperation I feel that I am indebted for the larger share of your approval; since they prefer to remain in the background, I can only thank you most heartily for them, as well as for myself, and assure you that, without their aid, I should never been in a position to thank you at all."

This frank avowal, which to nine-tenths of the audience was practically meaningless, and was taken by the remaining tenth as a kindly acknowledgment of Shepherd's technical acumen, delighted the author of Renunciation, who rubbed his hands and beamed. That Lilian Ormond considered it shabby and perfidious was the re-

sult, it is to be feared, of her feminine inability to accord even bare justice to one who had forfeited her respect. "He is only trying to make himself safe, in case he should be found out," she thought; "I should have liked him better if he had been a bolder thief."

Her irritation was intensified by Dick's contented acquiescence in the fraud; it was with difficulty that she held her tongue during the drive from the theater to Ashley Gardens, whither the trio had been bidden to supper by Harold, and when they reached their destination in advance of their host, Anne surveyed her curiously, asking:

"Well, haven't you a word to say?"

"I thought your brother acted very well, indeed," Lilian answered.

"There could hardly be two opinions about his acting. What about his piece, though? I can't pretend to be a judge; but I am free to confess that it seemed to me quite extraordinarily clever."

"Yes; only he himself told us that it was not really his own piece."

Anne shrugged her shoulders. "A sop to some Cerberus or other, I suppose," she remarked. "Victorious generals say that sort of thing about their staffs and their subordinates and even about the rank and file. It sounds modest, it gives pleasure to some people, and it misleads nobody."

"Your brother's speech didn't mislead *me*, anyhow," Lilian somewhat imprudently declared.

But at this juncture Dick began to talk rapidly, and in a few minutes Harold arrived, bringing with him

Shepherd, Miss Fitzwalter, and several other members of the theatrical company whom, as he had previously explained, it was impossible for him to exclude from his hospitality on such an occasion. He was in high spirits and a little excited—too excited, perhaps, to be chilled by the formal congratulations with which Lilian encountered him on his approach. If, at the moment, anything caused him misgivings, it was Lorna Fitzwalter's unavoidable presence and only too probable jealousy; but he was resolved that, whatever Lorna might say or do, Lilian should sit on his right hand at the supper-table, and he placed her there, while Lorna, on his left, took quick notes and reached quick conclusions. There is this difference between men and women that jealousy, which dulls the wits of the former, sharpens those of the latter, and Miss Fitzwalter, speedily perceiving that her opposite neighbor, if wooed, had no desire to be won, behaved quite quietly. She was even a little amused by and a little sorry for her volatile Harold, whose endless flirtations she was wont to view from a standpoint almost motherly and who was visibly exerting himself to small purpose now.

Oddly enough, he did not himself realize the futility of his exertions. Lilian, to be sure, was not quite like herself; she answered him for the most part in monosyllables and from time to time she fixed upon him a questioning glance which he was somewhat at a loss to interpret. But had she not, after all, some right to look interrogative? Of course she had, and of course she must still entertain doubts which he hoped ere long to dissipate. The verdict of a first night can not be held

absolutely conclusive; but he was persuaded in his own mind that Renunciation was in for a splendid run, and he saw in the near future a return of pecuniary prosperity which would justify expressed aspirations. Meanwhile, present conditions seemed to justify some elation. The supper party was a merry one; for everybody was naturally in good humor, and Mr. Shepherd's announcement that he had a toast to propose was received as warmly as if he had named the foreseen subject thereof. Assuredly it was with no equivocal intention that Shepherd asked all present to drink to the health of "the author of Renunciation." He alluded, of course, to Harold, whom in truth he regarded as for all practical purposes entitled to be so described, and who smilingly accepted the compliment, together with the hearty congratulations by which it was accompanied. Lilian watched him, saying to herself that now, if ever, must the disclaimer which ordinary honesty demanded be uttered; but no disclaimer came. Harold sat silent and complacent while guests, one after another, raised their glasses to him; so that when it came to the turn of his right-hand neighbor, she felt that he richly deserved what he was going to get. In a clear and steady voice she said:

"The health of the author of Renunciation! I mean Mr. Richard Dunville, who is the author—not Mr. Harold Dunville, who isn't."

It must be very disconcerting and very disappointing, after flinging a bomb into the midst of a crowded assemblage, to see it sputter into fragments, without so much as the momentarily startling effect of a harmless

explosion. If anybody, besides Lilian, was disconcerted during the next few minutes, it was the Reverend Richard, who made haste to declare that honors were, in any case, divided between him and his brother, and that, for his own part, he desired, as he had done all along, to preserve his anonymity. Harold was not disconcerted at all. He said, with a good-humored laugh, that he could not regret Miss Ormond's having let the cat out of the bag, because he had suffered, all the evening through, from an uncomfortable sensation of sailing under false colors. It was news to him that Miss Ormond had been told of the existence of a cat and a bag; but he was glad she knew and glad that all his friends in that room now knew. They would easily understand a clergyman's unwillingness to come before the public as a playwright, and he was sure that they would kindly respect a secret which he himself had not been permitted to divulge. "As for what Dick is good enough to assert about divided honors, you needn't believe a word of it; it's a case of *sic vos non vobis.* Only please believe that the writer is the humbug this time, not his very humble and reluctant supplanter."

Shepherd took leave to demur to the above statement, and so, quite eagerly and volubly, did Dick. According to them, the play was essentially a joint production, and its initiator had contributed little, if anything, to it beyond the raw material. And this view was evidently accepted and participated in by the rest of the company, whose sympathies may, not unnaturally, have been rather with their chief than with the parson. Presently Harold took occasion to whisper to Lilian:

"Don't you think you owe me a little bit of an apology?"

"No," she answered, stoutly, "I don't. It is all very plausible; but I can't change my mind. I still think that you have no right to strut about in borrowed plumes."

He only laughed. He only saw that she was vexed with him for not having taken her into his confidence, and only saw in her vexation a proof that his conduct was not a matter of indifference to her. He knew women and their ways so well! For the effecting of a reconciliation with this particular woman, however, the occasion did not seem to be very propitious. Other occasions would soon present themselves, or, if not, should be created. For the time being he was contented to think that his manner of encountering her unexpected onslaught could scarcely have lowered him in her eyes.

His manner, and, still more, Dick's manner, of receiving it had lowered her very considerably in her own esteem. To the lecture which was administered to her by her spiritual adviser, on the homeward drive, she could but submit in mortified silence, conscious of indiscretion and failure, consoled only partially by the grip of Anne's fingers, which closed, after a friendly fashion, upon her own, under cover of darkness. And even Anne's approval, it subsequently appeared, was based upon a strange, unwarrantable misconception.

"Oh, no," her hostess said, when interrogated in the privacy of the girl's bedroom, "I am not with you about Harold. I don't think he can fairly be blamed for having consented to a harmless little piece of deception

which seems to have been thrust upon him, and I should think it was true enough that he licked the play into shape, though he never could have written it. You ought not to have tried to exhibit him in the light of an unmasked humbug. All the same, I am not going to deny that I am uncommonly glad you did."

"I don't know why you should be glad that I managed to give offense all round, without convincing anybody," returned Lilian, ruefully.

The corners of Anne's mouth went down, and her eyes twinkled. "Would you like to be told why? Probably not. Nevertheless, I must give myself the satisfaction of telling you before I take to my heels. Because, my dear, your behavior convinced somebody—namely, me—of something which I am more than delighted to know. Much you care whether Harold is a humbug or not! But you care a great deal about Dick, or you wouldn't be so jealous of his fame. There!—I have said it, and I stick to what I have said; but I decline further discussion. I leave you to your own heart and your own conscience, which ought to keep you awake for the next half-hour between them, and I'm off to bed."

CHAPTER XIX

THE TOP OF THE HILL

DICK DUNVILLE, who had cravenly slunk off to bed, without saying good night to his sister, after their return to their hotel, had to meet her alone at breakfast on the following morning, and he brought a somewhat hangdog visage to the encounter.

"I don't know what you think of me," he diffidently began.

"I don't quite know myself," Anne made brisk reply. "Would it be going too far, I wonder, to say that I think you a genius? After all, that is pretty much what the newspapers say of you. At least, they say it of Harold, behind whom you are pleased to shelter yourself."

"You don't mean to tell me that they call Renunciation a work of genius!"

"They have said something of the sort before now upon less provocation, I believe. They are enthusiastically flattering, at any rate—read for yourself!"

She tossed a handful of papers across the table to him, and went on: "But if you ask me what I think of you and Harold from a moral point of view, I don't see why I should pay either of you compliments. If he

has practised a fraud upon the public, you have deceived your nearest relatives, although you have taken outsiders pretty freely into your confidence, it appears. There really doesn't seem to be a pin to choose between you."

"I was afraid your opinion would be that a parson might be better employed than in writing plays," Dick pleaded. "And a very sound opinion to hold, too."

"A very silly opinion, I should call it, to express about you, whom nobody on earth can accuse of neglecting your duties. Why not confess that you were afraid of my throwing cold water upon you?—a thing I should most probably have done, in my ignorance. Or was it perhaps that your amazing misplaced unselfishness prompted you to force fresh honors upon Harold?"

"Of course not! How could I tell that I wasn't forcing disaster upon him? The truth is that if anybody has been unselfish, as well as most serviceable, in this matter, it is he; and that makes me regret all the more what occurred at supper last night. It really was too bad of her!"

"It really was," Anne drily agreed, "and I hope she realizes by this time the folly of interfering between a donkey and a precipice. Not that you are over the precipice; only of course you would be if you had your deserts. Well, well! *I*, at all events, am not going to interfere and be scolded for my pains. Harold is to be allowed to go on reaping where he has not sown, I presume."

"That depends entirely upon what you mean by reaping. He is to pay me a very handsome—only too handsome, I am afraid—share of his takings, and, at the

risk of incurring your contempt, I must own that I wrote the play simply as a pecuniary speculation."

"I don't believe it," said Anne.

"Well, then, my motives were mixed; though I did most particularly want to make a little money, if I could. I certainly didn't want to see my name, with its reverend prefix, upon posters. For all that, I am not above being gratified by favorable reviews. What have the critics got to say about us?"

What, when summarized, they had to say was that Renunciation proved Mr. Harold Dunville to be something much more uncommon than a talented actor. His play, according to the critics of the daily papers, was one which demanded to be taken seriously and which, despite some imperfections, could not be regarded as a mere ephemeral contribution to dramatic literature. The remarkable success which had attended its initial representation might or might not be sustained; but it was assured, in any case, by its pathos, its brilliant dialogue and its well-contrived situations, of a permanent place among the very few works of its class which had been attempted of late years. The critics, in short, had evidently been taken by surprise, and some of them gave a free rein to their admiration, while others, more guarded, allowed it to be inferred that they were only waiting for the deliberate sanction of the public to express themselves in warmer language. Where they were at one, and where they doubtless felt upon safe ground, was in their praise of Harold's acting. This they pronounced to have been a veritable *tour de force,* and they declared—what indeed was the fact—that only he could have played the

part he had assigned to himself with the mingled fire and restraint and humor which were essential to its interpretation.

"Author or no author," Dick remarked, as he laid down the journals with a satisfied sigh, "Harold scores all along the line."

"And that is what you wanted, is it?" his sister returned. "Well, I must say for you, Dick, that, author or no author, genius or no genius, you are——"

But he was denied the privilege of hearing what, in Anne's judgment, he was by the entrance of Miss Lilian Ormond, who walked into the room at this moment, with her chin rather more in the air than usual and with an expression of countenance which seemed designed to discourage familiarity. Miss Ormond was very polite and amiable, if a trifle distant. She said she wished to apologize for her extremely silly behavior of the preceding evening. She quite saw now that there was much to be said for the arrangement which had been entered into between the two brothers, and she was very sorry that she had caused annoyance to them both by her meddlesome announcement. She hoped, however, that no great harm had been done, and she promised not to offend in the same way a second time. She also, it appeared, had been looking at the papers, and was delighted (or asserted that she was) by what she had read in them. Finally, she wanted to know whether her kind entertainers would be returning home by the twelve o'clock train or not. Because she was afraid she must not delay her own departure beyond that hour.

"But you are never going to desert us to-day!"

Dick expostulated. " We meant all along to see the piece through three nights; for everybody says that the first is nothing to go by. Don't you feel that you could stand another brace of representations? "

Lilian regretted so much that she must turn a deaf ear to the voice of the charmer. Unfortunately, she was wanted at home, and, much as she would have liked to see Renunciation a second and third time, she could not treat herself to that luxury. She was sure, for the rest, that there was no doubt at all about its having made a great hit. Her resolution was not to be shaken; nor, as Dick noticed, did Anne make much of an effort to shake it. When she had finished her breakfast—which did not take long—and had left the room, upon the plea of having to pack up, the rector said, rather reproachfully, to his sister:

" You might have given me a little help. I am afraid she is offended at what I said last night."

" I shouldn't wonder if she was," returned Anne, coolly; " but that won't do either her or you any harm. As for help, I should be charmed to give it you if you needed any; but you don't. Thank Heaven, all you have to do now is to go in and win; for you can't surely be so dense as to mistake the meaning of her attack upon Harold! Nevertheless, it is just as well that she should be allowed a little time to recover her temper after your ungrateful jobation."

" My dear Anne," exclaimed Dick, flushing slightly, " you don't in the least understand what you are talking about! If you had seen as much of woman as I have—— "

"I happen to be a woman myself," interjected Anne, demurely.

"Yes, yes, I know; but for that very reason you see what you wish to see, instead of unwelcome truths. I was going to say that what you call her attack upon Harold is the proof that she cares for him. If she hadn't cared, she wouldn't have been angry. The feeling that she has for me is a perfectly natural and rational one, which she has never concealed—the outcome of our long friendship, our respective ages, and mutual relations. I believe she is attached to me, and very glad I am that she is; but I am not to assume that because I am a lunatic she is another. For my own part, I can truly say that my one wish——"

"Oh, don't trouble yourself to formulate your one highly creditable wish," interrupted Anne, laughing; "you wish, of course, for her happiness. Well, it rests with you to make her happy; it certainly doesn't rest with Harold. All the same, she had better go home in a huff; for I don't deny that if you were to propose to her this morning she would probably be enough of a goose to refuse you."

It may be laid down as a general principle that people in love are always more or less of geese, and if Harold Dunville, during the course of his amorous career, had ever been really in love, he was so with Lilian Ormond. No doubt that was why the news of her abrupt departure dismayed him less than it would have done had he been able to believe in anything so antecedently improbable as her having lost her heart to his elder brother. What he did believe—and had good reason for believing—was

that he himself had possessed her heart not long ago; that he had estranged her by his rather cynical courtship of Miss Gardiner; that she was displeased with him, that she had tried to humiliate him, and that her failure to do so accounted for her turning her back upon him in the hour of his triumph. Really he could neither blame her nor wonder at her for that; yet he in no wise despaired. Better days, he hoped, were at hand—a day when it would be in his power to approach her once more, with frank avowals, with entreaties for pardon, with assurances of a fidelity which, when all was said, had survived trial, and—last, not least—with a comfortable balance at his bankers.

Meanwhile, he continued to play his part, on and off the stage, brilliantly and exultantly. Harold Dunville had at this time reached the zenith of his fame and prosperity; the piece at a bound carried public favor by storm; every place in the theater was booked weeks in advance; personages highly situated in the social, political, and literary world wrote him letters with their own distinguished hands which are still extant to show with what strange facility a handsome and fairly talented man may fascinate his fellow mortals; he enjoyed it all to the full, basking, as his habit was, in the present, with little thought or care for the future. With Lorna Fitzwalter he was charming—it was so important to conciliate her, and honeyed words came so readily to his lips; to his brother and sister, so long as they remained in London, he demeaned himself after a fashion which quite contented them both; in the presence of the many flatterers and admirers by whom he was surrounded he

displayed a very pretty and good-humored modesty. He did not mistake himself for a genius (being preserved from such absurd misconceptions by the common sense which was a constituent in his piebald character); but he knew that, whether deservedly or not, he was one of the conspicuous, powerful personalities of the passing hour, and the knowledge pleased him. Whom would it not have pleased? Thus the opening weeks of the year were weeks of sheer glory and joy to him; weeks when he saw his reputation ever increasing, when his private popularity beckoned him to giddy heights and when the money came tumbling in. He posted check after check to Dick down in the country, never doubting but that in so doing he was discharging all due obligations to a collaborator; he had not a great deal of time to devote to dreams of Lilian, though he did sometimes dream of her, and as for Josephine Gardiner, it may be said that, so far as he was concerned, she paid the proverbial penalty of absence.

However, there came in the month of March a certain evening on which it pleased Miss Gardiner to deliver herself from that disadvantage. From behind the footlights he recognized her fair hair and dark brows in a box in the first tier, and, at the sight of her, dormant ambitions woke anew in him. Why was she in London? It is not usual to return from the south of France at a date when our insular cold season is at its very worst, and he could not but remember that vision of his when, smarting a little under a defeat and a snub, he had pictured Miss Gardiner attracted homeward against her will by rumors of his achievements. Well, she should, at

all events, see what he could do! He acted that night with all the strength and skill he had in him, which is saying a good deal, and it may have been the reward of his efforts that a card was afterward brought to him in his dressing-room on which was scribbled in pencil, below Miss Gardiner's name, "Quite splendid! Congratulate you immensely. Do come and look me up in Grosvenor Place some afternoon at five o'clock."

Of course a hansom deposited him at the door of Sir Joseph Gardiner's London residence on the ensuing afternoon, a lurking suspicion that it might have been wiser, as well as more dignified, on his part to disregard Miss Josephine's summons adding some zest to the alacrity and curiosity with which he obeyed it. What she wanted of him he knew as little as he knew what he wanted of her; but he scented dramatic elements in the coming interview, and it would have been foreign to his whole nature to forego such a prospect.

"Very glad to see you," said Lady Gardiner, into whose presence he was shown. "Excuse me for not getting up; if I were to disturb Chatterbox, we shouldn't be able to hear ourselves speak for the next five minutes. Josephine told me to say, in case you should call, that she has been obliged to go out; but she hopes you will dine with us on Sunday if you are disengaged. Sunday, it seems, suits actors, as well as members of Parliament."

"You are very kind," answered Harold. "Naturally, that is my only evening off duty in the week, and I have no engagement for next Sunday, as it happens." He thought it only due to himself to add that all his time was fully occupied and that Miss Gardiner had given

him to understand that she would be at home on any afternoon at five o'clock.

" I accept no responsibility for Josephine or for her statements," returned the old lady, laughing placidly; " from what I hear, she seldom keeps an appointment, unless it is important, and not always then. She tells me that *you* have once more become important, though. Haven't you written a play or something? Anyhow, I gathered from what she said this morning that you are being talked about, and, as you know, she delights in people who are talked about."

Considering that all London was just then talking about Renunciation, Lady Gardiner's evidently honest ignorance and indifference seemed to border upon the sublime. Harold surveyed the old woman's fat, good-humored countenance and twinkling eyes, as she reclined in her low chair, with a couple of dogs upon her knees, and, acquitting her of any mocking intention, was more amused than affronted.

" I should despair," he remarked, " of interesting you in my humble bids for fame or notoriety; but I have the vanity to hope that I must have interested Miss Gardiner, since she thought it worth while to send me a congratulatory message after last night's performance."

Lady Gardiner nodded. " Oh, she's interested; she's tremendously keen upon taking you up again, I fancy, which is rather unusual with her. As a general thing, she doesn't pick up what she has once dropped, and there, I must say, I am disposed to be of her mind. Attempts which don't come off are best not resumed. At one time I went in for rearing turkey-chicks; but it was

such a worrying, disappointing business that I abandoned it, and though I am always being bothered to make a fresh start, I won't. I've tried it, you see, and I know just what the difficulties are."

"I dare say they are very great," answered Harold; "but you have fallen back upon some substitute, I suppose. Perhaps Miss Gardiner is of opinion that a dramatist is a substitute for a Parliamentary candidate. He isn't the same person, at all events."

"Well, he may be or he may not. In your case, I should have thought that he was—in another setting, to be sure, if that were likely to affect results. Have a cup of tea?"

Harold accepted. He had a notion that Lady Gardiner was not unamiably inclined toward him, that she wished to put him on his guard against renewing an unsuccessful enterprise, and that she could, if she chose, give him information about her daughter which might be of service to him. But although her candid remarks during the next quarter of an hour confirmed this impression, she did not tell him much. What Lady Gardiner disliked more than anything else in the world was trouble, and experience had taught her that interference with Miss Josephine's proceedings was apt to bring about trouble.

"I hope you are making a lot of money?" she remarked, incidentally and interrogatively.

"Yes, a lot, thank you," he replied, smiling.

"That's all right. I have always found ready money a huge consolation myself, and I believe everybody else does. Work also isn't a bad thing for those

who are not afflicted with corpulence. But I doubt whether there is much comfort to be got out of fantastic and extravagant experiments."

"Do you suspect me of embarking upon any?" Harold inquired.

"Oh, I know so little about you! I was thinking, when I spoke, of Josephine, who is nothing if not fantastic and empirical. Preserved from catastrophes, though, by a very clear vision of the side on which her bread is buttered. We are to have the pleasure of seeing you on Sunday, then? Sorry I can't have the pleasure of seeing your play, but theaters suffocate me."

Harold, as he left the house, said to himself, "I'll be hanged if she shall treat me like that!" But in what way he wished to be treated by Miss Gardiner he might have found it difficult to specify.

CHAPTER XX

JOSEPHINE REPLIES ON THE WHOLE CASE

SIR JOSEPH GARDINER had a prejudice, dating from the far-away period of his youth and Puritanical education, against Sunday dinner-parties; but this did not prevent him from entertaining a large circle on the first evening of every week during the Parliamentary session. Being something of a philosopher, he had long ago recognized the fact that prejudices are a luxury denied to husbands and fathers, and although he never knew who was going to dine under his roof on a given day—sometimes did not know even when their names were mentioned to him—he refrained from letting his guests see how greatly he would have preferred their room to their company. From time to time, too, these banquets were rendered less wearisome for him by the unexpected discovery of a kindred spirit among the assemblage. Harold Dunville, whom he had never fancied, could scarcely be described as a kindred spirit; yet the sight of him on that spring evening was so unexpected that Sir Joseph, entering the drawing-room, as usual, at the last moment, and blinking short-sightedly right and left, was moved to a species of cordiality.

"Dear me! Mr. Dunville, is that you? I thought

you had quite forsaken us. We have not met, I believe, since—since we came to grief together at the election. Well, sir, I don't know that you lose much by being excluded from the present House of Commons. The old giants of debate are all dead, and we don't seem to get any promising recruits. By the way, isn't that your successful opponent over there? I wonder who—ah, my daughter, no doubt! She delights in asking people to meet who perhaps would not have chosen to meet if they had been consulted beforehand. I dare say it was she who asked you."

Harold, who had but just arrived, had already recognized and been greeted by Captain Desborough, with whom Josephine was engaged in conversation. From Josephine he had met with a friendly, if somewhat preoccupied, reception, and he had been made to feel that he was not (as he had secretly expected to be) the guest of the evening. He was, in fact, one of sixteen guests, all, with the solitary exception of Desborough, distinguished either by birth or by career, and if he was, for the moment, rather more of a celebrity than any of them, Miss Gardiner did not appear to have realized the circumstance. Her neglect piqued him a little, although he had wit enough to perceive the unintentional compliment which it implied. She would hardly have omitted to welcome him with verbal compliments unless she had wished him to understand that he must not take too much for granted. He took, truth to tell, a good deal for granted; it would have been almost impossible for mortal man with experiences such as his had been to help doing so, and he was in no hurry. She would give him

his chance later in the evening, he knew; these preliminary tactics of hers only whetted his determination to take advantage of it.

His chance did not come at the dinner-table, where he was placed as far as possible from her, between the loquacious young wife of a Cabinet minister and a grim-visaged old woman, related to Lady Gardiner, whose name he did not catch. The Cabinet minister's wife told him that she had long been dying to make his acquaintance and chattered to him about his professional fascinations in a style which caused him to wish that she had died before attaining her object; his left-hand neighbor gruffly informed him that, although not much of a play-goer, she had been to see Renunciation, and was unable to understand why such a fuss had been made about the piece.

"Not a bit true to life," said she; "people who have a good title to a large property don't throw it away to please a jilt. That sort of thing doesn't happen."

"Perhaps not—only it did happen," Harold observed. "The episode is historically accurate, I believe, and those concerned in it were members of my own family."

"Oh, indeed!" snorted the old lady. "Then all I can say is that your ancestor richly deserved to lose all he lost, including his life. Renunciation has a noble sound, but it is really a mere synonym for idiocy. You may take my word for it, Mr. Dunville, that material advantage is the one thing worth securing in this dirty little world and the only thing that wise men try to

secure. The romantic persons who pretend to be above caring for it go to the wall—and serve them right!"

Harold laughed at this exaggerated cynicism, yet felt, as he sometimes did, that material advantages were not wholly to be despised. Dunville Manor, for instance?—and a wife who, even though he might not be enamored of her, would always be an agreeable, brilliant, stimulating companion? If he was to go in for the luxury of renunciation, let him at least have the satisfaction of exercising it. Miss Gardiner had so much the air of challenging him that he could do no less than take up her challenge.

He watched her during dinner, and perceived that she had her eye pretty constantly upon him, despite the unbroken dialogue which she kept up with Captain Desborough, who was seated by her side. Furthermore, he perceived that that gentleman had fallen an open and avowed victim to her charms. Poor, honest, breezy, nautical Desborough! It was not by the likes of him that Harold was in any danger of being rendered jealous, nor was there much fear of his enchantress being serious. A skilled comedian is quick to detect comedy, and the key to Josephine's behavior was one of a very ordinary pattern. Nevertheless, it did not follow that she was serious with regard to the man to whom her acting was addressed. Lorna Fitzwalter, who was in some respects shrewd, had unhesitatingly pronounced that she was not. Upon the whole, he was curious, a little excited, ready to go considerable lengths—resolved, in any case, that she should not elude him after dinner.

She made no attempt to do so. On the contrary, he

had no sooner entered the drawing-room with the other men than she imperatively beckoned him aside and began:

"Now tell me all about it, please. When was that play written?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders. "I am afraid I can't answer the question. It was made possible as a play last autumn, after I had so conclusively proved to you that I was impossible as a politician. One likes to prove that one is something, you see."

"Ah! that's just what I wanted to know. Well, you have certainly proved yourself to be something and somebody. It is far and away the finest English play that has been produced in our time."

"I am very glad you think so."

"Of course I think so; everybody thinks so. But you puzzle me. If you had it in your power to do such work, why on earth didn't you do it before?"

"Doesn't it occur to you that the incentive may have been lacking before?" asked Harold.

She broke into a laugh. "That would be such a pretty speech if it were but sincere! But, whether it is sincere or not—and for several reasons I don't quite believe it is—you make me feel that I failed to take your measure last autumn. Perhaps that is just what you wanted me to feel."

His eyes met hers. "Oh, there are several things that I should like to make you feel," he declared.

"I suppose there are," she returned, reflectively and composedly. And then, "I don't altogether trust you, somehow."

"If it comes to that, Miss Gardiner, I don't altogether trust you. It would be rather odd if I did, don't you think so?"

She appeared to give this question impartial consideration before she rejoined, with a smile, "Well, you shouldn't have been so horridly disappointing! I had set my heart upon getting you into Parliament, and, although I believe I threatened to abjure politics, I still have to own that, as a stepping-stone, nothing quite takes the place of the House of Commons."

"Is that why you have taken my late rival under your patronage? He is hovering about anxiously in the offing, I see, and evidently awaits a signal from you to join company."

"He won't get it; you are much too interesting to be interrupted. Yes, I have taken him under my patronage, because he also is interesting in his way. Oh, not talented, as you are, of course; still by no means a fool and provided with plenty of energy and common sense. There is no reason why he shouldn't go far, with his seat as a stepping-stone and some unobtrusive patronage—mine, if you like—to give him a hoist when it is needed. Look at Mr. Brereton, whose wife you took in to dinner. A commonplace, every-day man, if there ever was one; yet there he is on the Treasury bench."

"But not through his wife's exertions, surely!"

"Oh, I don't know. She is rather a goose; but she is pretty and she knows lots of influential people. However that may be, what I mean is that Captain Desborough has, or may have, a career before him. Is there any career before you, I wonder?"

The query sounded so frank that he did not hesitate to reply in the same spirit: "That depends upon what you call a career and upon what you think my aspirations ought to be. There was a time when you would have it that what I must necessarily aspire to was the reinstatement of my family in the old home."

"And don't you care about that?"

"I care a great deal about it," Harold answered, boldly; "only there is something else which I care about far more. If the one happens to imply the other, as perhaps it does, I can't help that."

She took no more notice of this plain declaration than as if it had never been uttered. "Careers," she remarked, pensively, "are various; much may be made out of a man of letters; though, as I have often told you, I don't see how anything is to be made out of an actor, except an actor. I may be wrong, but you strike me as being rather disquietingly wedded to the stage."

"At a word from you, a divorce shall be obtained," said Harold.

"Do you really mean what you say? Your meaning it would make you quite fascinatingly interesting, you know."

"Well, there was a time when you seemed to find me so."

"There was," she confessed, without hesitation; "but I am not sure that you ever found me so."

He was sufficiently adroit to leave her in doubt. "I couldn't manage to get up any thrilling interest in the election," he admitted.

"Nor could I, except as a means toward an end. The

question is whether the end is to be secured by other means or not."

"If you can't answer that question, I don't know who can," was Harold's rejoinder; and as he made it, he looked at her with those soft, smiling eyes of his which so few women had ever been able to resist. Miss Gardiner's senses were visibly troubled for an instant, but only for an instant.

"I must say for you that you are an excellent actor," she calmly observed, after a brief pause, "and you certainly pay me a high compliment when you offer to give up being an actor. I'm glad to have seen you in Renunciation, and I'm glad to have seen the piece, which was well worth seeing. It so often happens that one comes in for a treat like that by mere chance, doesn't it?"

"Was it mere chance, then, that brought you back from the Riviera in such haste?" Harold had the temerity to ask.

"Oh, no, that wasn't chance. The fact is that I returned because I wanted to hear Captain Desborough make his maiden speech. A capital speech!—did you read it? The House always enjoy hearing naval men talk about naval matters, and what he had to say was said just in the right style. Quite clear and convincing and colloquial, with a joke or two, which made his hearers laugh because they made him laugh, thrown in to enliven the dry passages. Oh, as I tell you, there's no reason why he shouldn't go a long way."

If her design was to provoke Harold's jealousy it failed, for he knew well enough that her return to Eng-

land could not have been brought about by Captain Desborough's casual and doubtless unpremeditated contribution to a recent debate. Nevertheless, he was a little annoyed when, without giving him time to reply, she made that signal to the gallant captain for which the latter had been patiently keeping his weather eye open during the last ten minutes or so.

"Would you believe," she smilingly asked, as Desborough drew near, "that Mr. Dunville has been proclaiming his readiness to throw up the stage only because, in my humble judgment, he is thrown away upon it?"

"Oh, well, I should believe in anybody's doing anything that you asked him to do, Miss Gardiner," was the prompt reply which she received. "All the same, I shall be awfully sorry, and so will everybody else be, if our friend Mr. Dunville takes you at your word. I suppose you must have persuaded him that he can do as well elsewhere as upon the stage; but he can't do better, you know, because that would be impossible. Such a lot of my time has been put in abroad that the first opportunity I've had of admiring him came a few nights ago, when I went to see Renunciation, and I must say I never enjoyed myself more in my life. I'm no critic, of course; but, by Jove, Dunville, it strikes me that you're hard to beat!"

"Thank you," answered Harold, laughing; "that is a handsome tribute, coming from a man who beat me pretty soundly the only time when I tried to measure my strength against his."

"My dear fellow," returned the other, "that was

simply because I happened to hold the winning cards, and because it takes a good deal to get dissatisfied Tories to vote Radical. If it had been a question of measuring your brains against mine, I should have been nowhere; but they didn't expect fine language from me, and didn't get it. Besides, the fact is that I'm a lucky man—always have been. Somehow or other, I seem to get what I try for almost as a matter of course."

This announcement was made with a confidential simplicity and geniality which went far toward explaining the phenomenon to which it referred. Harold surveyed the big, broad-shouldered, sunburned sailor, and felt, with a quick pang of envy, that he was looking at a man big in every sense.

"One difference between us," he mused, "is that I am not big, and I suspect that one reason for his getting what he wants is that he always knows what he wants, whereas I never do. Not, at all events, until I have got whatever it may be, when I pretty generally become quite sure that I didn't want it. Lucky! I should rather think he was lucky to be built on such lines! Why, the beggar is over head and ears in love with Miss Josephine; yet he isn't a bit enraged with me for having monopolized her all this time! He doesn't pay me the compliment of being alarmed or dismayed for one moment, confound him! It's ridiculous, perhaps; but it's by men of his sort that battles are won."

The above reflections and others of a kindred nature were made while Miss Gardiner and Desborough were keeping up a lively interchange of ideas. From time to time he was appealed to by one or other of them, and he

took an occasional part in a conversation from which neither of them appeared anxious to exclude him. It could not be said that they were making love or even flirting; only something in their evident mutual comprehension and good-fellowship warned Harold that Desborough might not, after all, be the negligible rival he had at first supposed. Thus at length he was put upon his mettle and forgot all the excellent reasons that he had for being indifferent as to Josephine's destiny. It was clear that she did not intend to give him sole possession of her ear again that evening; but when, on bidding her good night, he asked her, in so many words and in a resolute voice, to name some day on which he might see her alone, she replied at once:

"Five o'clock on Tuesday, if that will do you. Ask for me, and you will be shown into my sanctum, which no unauthorized person ever dares to invade."

Well might Harold say of himself that he never knew what he wanted. He knew what he did not want; he knew that he hated to be thrown over by any woman; he knew that the idea of being cut out of the succession to Dunville Manor by Captain Desborough (of all people in the world!) was extremely distasteful to him. But whether he really wanted to win the prize for which he had virtually proclaimed himself a candidate or not was another question. It was, however, certain now that nothing short of failure to keep his appointment could dispense him from the obligation of making Miss Josephine Gardiner a formal offer of marriage. It may be conjectured that what would have entirely satisfied his soul would have been to receive an offer of marriage

from her and, with deep emotion, deep gratitude, and regret—to decline it. But as even Miss Gardiner was not sufficiently emancipated from the thraldom of social tradition to take a step so unusual as that, the ensuing two and forty hours brought some moments of anxiety and misgiving to her destined suitor.

Nevertheless, he presented himself on the Tuesday afternoon with a fairly serene countenance—relying, indeed, a good deal upon his star. If Desborough was a lucky man, so, after another fashion, was he; he had been in, and had got out of, many a tight place in years gone by; it had never been his way to take much heed for the morrow, and he had generally found himself on his feet after no matter what shock or adventure. No sooner had he been admitted into Miss Gardiner's private room, which was in many respects the counterpart of that assigned to her use at Dunville Manor, than he advanced straight to the assault.

"I have come," he announced, "to beg for an answer to the question which, as I told you the other day, you alone can answer. Am I to abandon the stage or not?"

"I don't think," Josephine smilingly observed, "that that was exactly the question which I left unanswered, was it? Didn't it refer to a certain end and to the possibility of arriving at that end by some other means than by a seat in Parliament?"

"Yes, I believe so. It's the same thing, you know."

"For all practical purposes, I suppose it is," she meditatively agreed; "only perhaps it would save time

if you were to put another question to me which I presume that you intend to put. Then I should be able to reply on the whole case, you see."

He did not altogether like her manner, which was perceptibly ironical; but he at once complied with her invitation, and he was for the moment so thoroughly sincere in desiring to win the game upon which he was engaged that a very pretty flow of eloquence rose to his lips. A good deal of what he protested was quite true. Not, to be sure, the whole of it; but certain assurances must, after all, necessarily accompany any offer of marriage, and upon these he did not dwell with more warmth than was unavoidable, for he felt instinctively that Josephine was to be attracted rather by a brilliant than by an ardent wooer. She listened to him with apparent pleasure, nodding her head from time to time, and when he had made an end, she said:

"Now I am going to be perfectly honest with you. I have always rather prided myself upon not being a romantic person, and if you had won that election and had asked me to marry you immediately after it, I believe I should have accepted you. For, although we don't love one another in any romantic sense, you and I—no, you are not to interrupt, please; it is my turn to speak—although we are not romantically attached, we might have made a happy enough couple, as couples go. Well, you lost the election; but then you came out as a writer of a play which has had an extraordinary, and I must own a well-deserved success; so that seemed to open up fresh horizons. You see, Mr. Dunville, I really do like you very much, even if, as I told you on Sunday evening, I don't

implicitly trust you. On Sunday evening you had a distinct chance; but—Sunday was followed by Monday."

"It always is. You mean, I suppose, that on Monday you began to have doubts."

"No, I mean that Monday brought me certainty. Walking across the park yesterday, whom should I meet but our friend, Miss Fitzwalter—thrown in my path, I must assume, by a kindly and watchful Providence. Of course, I stopped her; of course we discussed you and Renunciation, and I am sure she did not know what a portentous disclosure she was making when she let out the circumstance that the play was, after all, not written by you, but by your brother. I don't think I ever was more amazed in my life. Not at its turning out that you were not the author, it had seemed to me all along so amazing that you should be, but at the revelation which it gave me of your brother's capacities. Who would ever have believed that a country parson knew as much as that! I must certainly cultivate him when we go down to Dunville again. We are not concerned with your brother just now, though, are we? I wonder whether you will understand what I mean when I say that that confidential communication of Miss Fitzwalter's put an end and a finish to your chance with me."

"I can understand," answered Harold, resentfully, "that that may have been the object of her communication. Scarcely fair play on her part; for she knows just as well as everybody else who is in the secret does that I only assumed responsibility for the authorship by Dick's own wish. It is rather hard lines, I think, that I

should be accused of being a literary thief because I consented to oblige him."

"Ah, I thought very likely you wouldn't see the point! I accuse you of nothing, nor does Miss Fitzwalter; I agree with her that you and your brother were entitled to make any arrangements between yourselves that suited you, although I am afraid this one may end by exposing you to some ill-natured comments. But the point with regard to you and me is that, since you didn't write Renunciation you revert to what you were before—a very clever actor, with abilities which seem at first sight to point to there being something more in you, but which, when it comes to testing them, prove of no practical value. Don't you see that a husband of that stamp would never do for me?"

"Josephine," said Harold, drawing his chair a little nearer and laying his fingers upon her wrist, "you are pleased to talk as if we were a couple of bargainers—as if I wanted to marry the only child of the man who is in possession of Dunville Manor, and as if I hadn't a sufficient equivalent to offer. But is that the truth? Is it true that we are as devoid of all capacity for romantic emotion as you pretend?"

"Oh, I should think you might manage a good deal in that way," she composedly returned, "and even I, in the case of some simple, single-hearted man who honestly loved me——"

"Such as Desborough, for instance?"

"Such as Captain Desborough," she assented. "I don't know whether you have noticed that Captain Desborough, for all his easy-going good nature, is a rather

masterful personage. He wouldn't stand much nonsense in his wife, I suspect; but, on the other hand, she would be able to rely upon him absolutely. Those are the right sort of men to marry, and in her heart every woman acknowledges it."

"Is it possible," Harold began, incredulously, "that you contemplate——"

She cut him short. "Oh, it's possible; I don't say it's likely. What is now quite impossible is that I should ever consent to marry you. I have told you frankly that the thing might have come to pass. Let us be thankful that it didn't; for we should have led a cat and dog life as man and wife, and you would very soon have found yourself living apart from me on an annual allowance. I should recommend you—I hope I am not giving you bad advice, and I don't think I am—to marry Miss Fitzwalter, who knows pretty well what you are, who adores you *quand même,* and who will forgive you until seventy times seven. As for the manor, I don't believe you really care about being Dunville of Dunville, and I doubt, after all, whether you would adorn the position. The stage, I end by thinking, is your place. So we will shake hands upon that and be friends; for, as I mentioned just now, I really do like you very much."

CHAPTER XXI

A COUNTRY SUNDAY

"WELL, my dear," said Mr. Ormond, fretfully, as he stood with his back to the fire and his coat-tails gathered up under his arms, "I consider that you have been to blame in the matter, and when I think people are to blame I tell 'em so. It has always been my rule, as you know, to say straight out what I think."

Certainly Mr. Ormond did not often allow misplaced tenderness for the feelings of others to deter him from observing that honest rule, and his wife, generally speaking, accepted his rebukes passively enough, whether they were deserved or not, making due allowance for gout. On the present occasion, however, she felt justified in remarking:

"But, after all, it wasn't I who first invited the young man to call last summer."

"Now, my dear, what is the sense of making such a shallow excuse as that? I spoke to him at his poor mother's funeral because I thought it was a neighborly thing to do, and because there was a general feeling against him which seemed to me rather unfair. I believe I did ask him to look us up; but to magnify that into an encouragement to him on my part to break Lil's heart is really a little bit too preposterous!"

"I hope and believe he hasn't done that," Mrs. Ormond returned, with a troubled look; "but even if he had, I don't see how I could have helped it."

"It is a mother's business," Mr. Ormond declared, severely, "to take care that such things shall not happen. What you can have been thinking about to have him here all day and every day, as you did, I am at a loss to understand!"

This was more than Mrs. Ormond could stand. "Why, I suppose I was thinking about the very same thing as you were!" the poor lady exclaimed. "You must have seen as plainly as I did what was going on, and you didn't seem to have any objection. Oh, I know you objected after he put himself forward as the Radical candidate and devoted himself openly to Josephine Gardiner; but that, unfortunately, was rather late in the day."

"As if I should ever, under any circumstances, have sanctioned my daughter's engagement to a professional actor!"

"Well, you behaved as if you were ready to sanction it, and I must confess that I thought you were. When all's said, he is a gentleman by birth, though his conduct may not have been that of a gentleman. What consoled and reassured me was that Lilian was evidently disgusted with him. At the time of the election and afterward she seemed to have got over it and to be quite herself again."

"H'm!—you won't pretend, I suppose, that she is herself now?"

"No, I don't; I only wish I could! She has been

altogether different ever since she went up to London to see him in that wretched play."

"Ah, just so!—exactly so!—there you are! Why was she allowed to go?"

"Because," answered Mrs. Ormond, gathering up her needlework and preparing for flight, "you gave her permission without consulting me. If my opinion had been asked, I should have said it was a risk; but my opinion, as usual, was not asked, and, as usual, I am scolded because a disaster in which I had no hand has come to pass."

She got out of the room as quickly as she could after firing that shot, and left her irate spouse to fume on the hearth-rug all by himself. Mr. Ormond was very irate and much distressed; but, being more just at heart than in speech, he was fain to acknowledge inwardly that his acceptance of Anne Dunville's invitation on his daughter's behalf had been a sad mistake. Bother Anne Dunville!—why the deuce had she ever given that invitation? A sensible sort of woman, too, generally speaking, and not at all given, one would have thought, to laying plots which were absurd upon the face of them. She must have known perfectly well that a match between Lilian and her play-acting brother was out of the question! Such were Mr. Ormond's mental ejaculations; for he did not choose to admit even to his own soul what it was that he really feared. Play-actor or no play-actor, Harold was a Dunville, and Lil must not break her heart. Had the young man come forward with formal proposals, he would have been snubbed and objurgated, no doubt, but he would not have been finally rejected. The un-

happy part of the business was that the young man showed no sign of coming forward. And Lilian, meanwhile, was growing pale and thin, and refused her food. Rubbish about its being Lent! On no previous penitential season had the roses forsaken her cheeks, nor had she displayed so obstinate a preference for solitude.

The Lenten season was in truth one of penitence and humiliation for Miss Ormond, although the cause of its being so was other than that not unnaturally surmised by her fond parents. It is, or is said to be, a common enough experience among women to mistake the nature of their affections, and to love one man while fancying themselves in love with another; such errors are not unpardonable, even if to the male understanding they may appear somewhat unaccountable. But Lilian's case was a much worse one. Her case—slowly and unwillingly, yet courageously, admitted in the course of long rambles through fields and woods swept by the keen March winds and gay with nodding daffodils—was that not long ago she had been really and truly in love with Harold Dunville, whom she had learned to despise, and that she now far more really and truly loved his elder brother, whose affection for her was simply that of a kind and friendly pastor for a grown-up child. Worse still, she had contrived to betray her feelings in such a way as to render them evident to Anne—evident also, no doubt, to others, including, it might be, Dick himself. She would have had to be either extraordinarily humble or abnormally proud to carry her head high so long as it contained the reflections prompted by the above deplorable facts. Fain would she have hidden her head; but, that feat being

difficult of accomplishment, she disquieted her family by an unwonted shyness, taciturnity, and withdrawal from their companionship.

She likewise, had she but known it, occasioned no small disquietude to the rector of Dunville by her studied avoidance of him and his sister, and by the chilly greetings which she vouchsafed to him as often as greetings were necessary. He took it for granted that the rather ungrateful homily which he had addressed to her in London had given her mortal offense, taking it also for granted that she had not ceased to love Harold because she had, or affected to have, ceased to think well of him. He himself could not think very highly of Harold, whose behavior seemed to show heartlessness or heedlessness, and the fact that he would have welcomed any indication on his brother's part of return to an interrupted allegiance gives the measure alike of the excellent man's self-abnegation and simplicity. For, indeed, he cared too deeply for Lilian to desire anything except her happiness, while he held far too modest an opinion of his own physical attractions to place the least faith in such nonsense as Anne had tried to make him believe. It may have been a little of a disappointment to him that Anne made no further assaults upon his credulity, either in the cause of nonsense or sense. Anne, to whom the situation was as clear as daylight, held her peace, and indulged in an occasional private chuckle, knowing that all was bound to end satisfactorily now. Sooner or later magnet and steel would meet, and an estrangement which was so visibly distressing to both parties would be terminated by the act of one or other of them. If, in the

meantime, Lilian saw fit to decline invitations to tea, to neglect week-day services, and to visit the poor of the parish at hours when the rector was necessarily employed elsewhere, the more fool she! "I have done her the service of opening her eyes for her," Anne reflected; "she may open her own mouth, or let Dick open his, at her leisure."

No change in the state of affairs had as yet come to pass when, on a certain Sunday morning, the curiosity of Mr. Dunville's congregation was stirred up by the apparition of Lady Gardiner's bonnet in the manor pew. Lady Gardiner seldom or never visited her country residence at that time of year, nor, to tell the truth, was she at any time a regular churchgoer. On this occasion she brought one of her Schipperkes with her, and it barked shrilly during the sermon, a breach of decorum for which she duly apologized when the rector, in compliance with a request conveyed to him, came out to shake hands with her after she was seated in her carriage.

"I blush for William the Silent," said she; "so unlike him to belie his name in that public way! But I think he must have been under the impression that you were shaking your fist at me—which he would naturally resent, you know."

"Teach me to moderate my gesticulation in future," answered Dick, laughing. "At any rate, William and I managed to keep you awake between us."

"Oh, yes, you did, and that's more than most preachers can do, I assure you. I quite enjoyed your sermon. Now will you, like a good man and just to show that there's no ill feeling, come back and lunch with me?

A COUNTRY SUNDAY

No, Anne, I don't invite you, my dear; I want your brother alone this time. You can come and see me to-morrow, if you'll be so good; for I shall be here until Tuesday, attending to one or two odd jobs which have brought me down from London."

The only job that had brought her ladyship down from London was perhaps a somewhat odd one to have been undertaken by a person of her indolent temperament; but she had a warm heart, which now and then moved her to steps of energy. Dick, who, after hesitating for a moment, decided to seat himself beside her upon the cushion which she slapped persuasively with her open palm, was enlightened as to the nature of her errand before half the distance which separated the church from the manor had been covered.

"My appetite and my sleep are being interfered with by that brother of yours," she began. "Of course you may say—only I know you won't—that he isn't worth bothering about; but if he isn't, other people are. You will be having him down here some day soon, unless I am much mistaken."

"He is down here now," said Dick. "He telegraphed yesterday morning to say that he could spare us a week-end, and in the middle of the night he arrived—so tired out that I felt justified in dispensing him from attendance at church this morning."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, I'm not surprised, and I'm glad I lost no time in countermarching him. I suppose he didn't happen to tell you that he honored us with his company at dinner on Sunday last?"

"No; he hasn't mentioned it."

"Nor, I presume, that on Tuesday he honored my daughter Josephine with an offer of marriage at which she didn't see her way to jump?"

"You don't say so!"

"I say so upon the best authority. Now, as you are aware, I never attempt to interfere with Josephine, who can look after herself as well as I could look after her, if not better, the proof of which is that she bowed your brother out. Even if she had accepted him I should have been sorry for her, but I should have made no fuss, because I should have understood that she must be confident of making something out of him. She tells me that there isn't anything to be made out of him, and I should think she was right. At all events, there is no danger of his becoming my son-in-law now, and I confess that that is rather a relief to me, as well as to Joseph, who, for some reason or other, has never been particularly fond of Mr. Harold. But, on thinking things over, I guessed what Mr. Harold's next step was likely to be, and I tell you plainly that I don't wish him to succeed in it. I'm sure you'll agree with me that Lilian Ormond deserves a happier fate than she would have any prospect of obtaining as his wife."

Dick sighed. "Perhaps she does; although I take it that, generally speaking, getting what one desires makes for happiness. But why do you assume that Harold, who, according to your account, has just been rejected by Miss Gardiner, is in such desperate haste to—to commit himself in another quarter?"

"Bless me!" returned the old lady, with a wheezy laugh, "you, as a parson, ought to have had plenty of

opportunities for noticing that that isn't an uncommon effect of rejection upon your sex. However, the present case isn't altogether one of pique. Your brother, I believe, really did begin by losing his heart—what there was of it—to Lilian, and, although he didn't mind breaking with her when Josephine made a fool of him by hinting at a glittering future, he would probably be glad enough to return to the old love now that that bubble has burst."

"I think," observed Dick, pensively, "that you are perhaps a little too hard upon Harold. What you have told me surprises me a good deal, I confess; but I can't imagine——"

"Oh, my dear man, you could if you had any sense!" interrupted Lady Gardiner, with unwonted asperity. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for being as clever as you undoubtedly are and yet failing to see what is as plain as a pikestaff to the stupid old likes of me! And you will have still greater reason for being ashamed of yourself if you allow the poor girl to be talked over."

"What do you wish me to do?" asked Dick.

"Oh, not much," answered Lady Gardiner, laughing and recovering her good humor. "I hope to do something myself, although I can't altogether dispense with your help. That's why I asked you to lunch. Lilian has promised to walk over early in the afternoon, and I want you, while I am having a talk with her, to step round and prescribe for Lord Chancellor, who is suffering so dreadfully with his teeth, poor dear! It makes him rather troublesome to handle; but you know

how to catch hold of him, don't you? And I believe there are forceps in the stables, if they should be wanted; but I can't bear to think of that. Well, I was going to say that, when you have done with him, you might as well walk Lilian home. Do you see?"

"I see," answered the rector of the parish, rather ruefully, "that you have let me in for a troublous afternoon and that the Sunday-school children will have to get on as best they can without me."

"They'll get on without you all right—unless they get off, which will probably suit them still better. Now I hope you realize that, if through any mistaken notion of generosity to your brother, you allow Lilian to fall a victim to his plausibility, you will not only be a false friend but a downright enemy to her. He is sure to be plausible, and, although she must know him by this time a good deal better than she did, there is still some danger of her being humbugged. I imagine that a few words from you will go farther with her than any warnings of mine; so you must speak those few words, unless you prefer to hold your tongue and risk ruining her life for her. Well, here we are, and I've said all I had to say. Dear me, what a hungry thing church, combined with this sharp wind, is! I feel as if I could eat the house up!"

While this very unexpected spoke was being put in his wheel, Harold, who had risen and breakfasted so late that, unlike Lady Gardiner, he had no appetite for luncheon, was sauntering leisurely across country in the direction of Beechwood Hall. He knew that on Sundays the Ormond family lunched at the archaic hour of one

o'clock, he knew that it was Lilian's custom to walk over to the Sunday-school immediately after the conclusion of that meal, and he thought that, with any luck, he ought, by dawdling a little, to contrive to intercept her on her way. If not, he would march boldly on to the house, take the bull by the horns, and make friends (sooner or later that must needs be done) with his future father-in-law. For Mr. Ormond was going to be his father-in-law; he had at last done with all doubt and vacillation. His rejection by Josephine had given him at the time, as he himself inwardly phrased it, "rather a nasty knock"; but that was only because it is never pleasant to be rejected and because the experience was so strange a one to him, not because he regretted either the lady or her fortune. On the contrary, he rejoiced to think that nothing and nobody (for of course poor Lorna did not count) now stood between him and the girl to whom his heart had remained faithful all along. It had been almost obligatory upon him—that was the way in which he put the case to himself—to make a bid for the recovery of the family property; but since he had failed, he was free, and gladly free, to consult the dictates of that faithful heart of his.

So he strolled on under the hard blue sky and between budding hedgerows, rather enjoying the keen wind and pausing every now and then in some sheltered spot to while away with a cigarette the time which must yet elapse before he could expect to descry the symbol of his happy future in the shape of a certain trim little figure. He was conscious of some quickening of the pulses, but not, it must be confessed, of much misgiving,

when at length he did catch sight of that same little figure advancing briskly toward him across a stretch of gorse-covered common; and he took it as no bad sign that Lilian started violently and colored up, as he stepped forward, hat in hand, to accost her. Her manner of greeting him, to be sure, was scarcely friendly; but then he had not anticipated that it would be.

"What has brought you down here?" she asked. "You are the last person whom I should have expected to see at this time of year."

"Why shouldn't I tell the simple truth?" he answered, smiling and taking her hand, which he retained in his grasp. "It was the hope of seeing you that brought me down here in the middle of the night and has brought me out here to-day. It must be my lucky star, I suppose, that has brought you out to meet me."

She withdrew her fingers, and there was no responsive smile upon her lips as she returned: "I don't think your lucky star can have had much to do with it. I came out because Lady Gardiner, who also has arrived unexpectedly on a flying visit, sent me a rather imperative summons. She has some interesting news to give me, she says."

Harold's brow clouded over. In an instant he divined the motive of Lady Gardiner's abrupt, officious descent, and it was by a brilliant, as well as an audacious, inspiration that he exclaimed:

"Then my lucky star has had a good deal to do with my having waylaid you! For I believe I know what Lady Gardiner's interesting piece of news is, and I would rather that you heard it from me than from her.

I meant, anyhow, to tell you that I made a formal offer of marriage to her daughter some days ago, that it was declined, and that I rejoice unspeakably in its having been declined."

"That," observed Lilian, without loss of composure, "doesn't surprise me."

"What doesn't surprise you? My proposal to Miss Gardiner, or her refusal, or my joy at being refused? Not one of these things is really surprising, although the first of them might very well seem so to you; because I am sure you can't need to be told that I have never for one moment been in love with Miss Gardiner. I wonder whether you understand! I wonder whether you remember that evening just after the election when I met you at the rectory and spoke pretty plainly to you about Miss Gardiner and myself."

"Quite well. It was on that occasion that you informed me you had written a play—which you hadn't written."

"Did I? I had forgotten that the play was alluded to then, and I still think, as I told you in London, that you owe me an apology about the play, which was only ascribed to me by Dick's insistent request. But I owe you an apology—a thousand apologies—about Miss Gardiner, and I fully admit that my having actually ended by proposing to her isn't easy to explain. Only I felt that you ought to be told."

He sighed and fell momentarily silent, while he paced on by her side; for Lilian had not allowed their encounter to interrupt her forward march, and he had perforce turned to walk with her.

"I really can't see why you should have felt that," she remarked presently, since his explanation seemed to hang fire.

"Ah, don't pretend not to know what you can't possibly help knowing! Of course I owe explanations and apologies to the only human being whom I have ever loved in the whole course of my drifting, unedifying life! But how to give them!—how to make them intelligible! Lilian, I don't want to make myself out any better than I am; I confess that at one time the idea of reestablishing the family smiled at me—so much so that I almost felt as if it might be a duty to take a header into that gulf. Then came the fiasco of the election and Miss Gardiner's disdainful abandonment of the whole business, including me. I told you that evening at the rectory, you know, how glad I was to be abandoned, and if I did not in so many words tell you why—because, frankly speaking, I was too impoverished at the time to have any right to tell you why—you must have guessed. But you will ask what in the world induced me to rush back into danger after I had had the good fortune to be set free."

"No, indeed," interrupted Lilian, "I don't ask. I don't want to know. Please say no more about it."

"Oh, I must say more; I must answer, even if you don't care to ask. Her coming back from the Riviera in such haste was a sort of challenge, you see; she had the air of throwing down the glove, and I couldn't resist picking it up. There!—I believe that is about as near the truth as I can get. I didn't want to marry her; I have never wanted to marry anybody but you; yet——"

"Yet the chance of winning the manor was not to be discarded, I suppose. I don't know whether I ought to thank you or not for having been so candid; but I will try, at any rate, not to be left behind in candor. It was quite unnecessary to tell me all this, Mr. Dunville; for nothing that you could have said or left unsaid would have induced me to marry you."

"Because you are angry with me. Well, I can't wonder at that or complain of it."

"I really don't think I am angry. I may be a trifle disgusted; but if I am, it makes no difference. The conclusive thing is that—I don't love you."

Harold shook his head sorrowfully. "Ah, yes; that would indeed be conclusive, if—" He broke off, but presently resumed, almost in a whisper, "Can you say that you didn't love me last summer, Lilian?"

She could not say that, and the humiliation of being unable to do so brought a rush of color into her cheeks. However, she stood at bay and faced him bravely. "I did not know much about you last summer," she replied; "I know a good deal more now. Whatever you may assert, and whatever your brother may assert, I shall always think that your claiming to be the author of Renunciation was an act of which no gentleman and no honest man could have been guilty."

"What would you have me do?" he inquired, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "Shall I write to all the newspapers and announce that Dick originated what I adapted? I'll do that if you like; but I doubt whether Dick will be pleased, and I am sure that nobody—a few critics, perhaps, but nobody else—will be interested."

"No," she returned, "I don't want you to do that, or to do anything, except—if you will be so kind—to say good-by here and cross that stile on your right, which will take you by a short cut to the rectory. Your behavior about the play was only an incident; I dare say, if it hadn't occurred, other incidents would have enlightened me; but it happened to suffice, and that was my reason for alluding to it. Are you convinced?"

He was not in the least convinced. Her agitation, the tremor in her voice, the unwonted brusquerie of her manner, were so many signs to his experienced sense that there was no need for him to despair.

"Ah, you *are* angry!" he sighed, as he took the valedictory hand which she extended to him; "no one knows better than I that you have a right to be. Well, I won't persecute you any more now; but let me say that I shall not change, and that I shall never give up hope until I hear of your being married or engaged to another man. I shall come back again, and yet again——"

"If you were to come back a thousand times," she interrupted, "you would always get the same answer. But I don't think you will come back; for, although I can't pretend to have much respect or admiration for you, I do at least recognize that you are not stupid."

CHAPTER XXII

DICK DOES HIS DUTY

LILIAN resumed her walk with something of that inevitable satisfaction which attends the consciousness of having returned tit for tat. Harold Dunville had, some months back, lowered her considerably in her self-esteem, and now, she hoped, his own had been taken down a peg or two. Moreover, she was under no obligation to feel sorry for him; for although it might be, as it seemed to be, true that his affection for her had survived transient infidelities, she could neither regard that affection as being of much intrinsic value nor believe that she had it in her power to hurt him seriously, save in his vanity. After what she had heard from him, she was not unprepared for the piece of news promised her by Lady Gardiner, and she rather looked forward to telling her well-meaning old friend how very little interest such information now had for her. Fond as she was of Lady Gardiner, and grateful for many kindnesses, she could not quite forget a certain afternoon when that excellent woman had put her to something like open shame by endeavoring to persuade her that grapes which were out of her reach were sour. The grapes had come within her reach; she no longer needed to be convinced of their acidity; still less was she disposed to welcome a hint that she might at last secure them, if so minded.

Consequently, Miss Lilian stepped across the park toward Dunville Manor, holding her chin a trifle higher, perhaps, than she would have done had she known who had been lunching there and who was even now emerging from the stable-yard which adjoined the house. Intervening shrubs concealed him from her, as they concealed her from him, until the pair met abruptly at such close quarters that they could not choose but shake hands —a thing they had not done for some weeks past. It was Dick's left hand that he held out, with an apology, his right being tied up in a blood-stained handkerchief.

"That vicious ape," he exclaimed, laughing. "Lady Gardiner sent me out to operate upon his teeth, and he managed to let me know how sound some of them were. I successfully extracted the unsound one, though —for which I don't suppose he will ever forgive me."

"Hateful beast!" exclaimed Lilian, involuntarily abandoning the frigid politeness which had of late characterized her demeanor toward the rector of the parish. "Has he bitten you badly?"

"Oh, dear, no; only a nip. But my discourse tonight will be shorn of the graceful gestures which moved Lady Gardiner's dog to a noisy demonstration this morning. By the way, I didn't see you in church."

"No; I—I wasn't there," answered Lilian, guiltily conscious of having recently put forward one pretext after another for attending a neighboring place of worship. "Do you mean to say that Lady Gardiner actually took one of the dogs with her? I wonder what she will do next!"

"So do I," observed Dick, with a rather grim smile.

But he was afraid that he knew well enough what Lady Gardiner proposed to do next, and he was likewise a little afraid of the possible results of her ladyship's intended action. Doubtful also whether or not it behooved him to avert, so far as might in him lie, those results. For in truth it did seem to him a monstrous thing that his brother should have gone the length of proposing to Josephine, and he could not for the life of him understand why such an offer had been made. Should he, since chance had brought him thus prematurely face to face with Lilian, say anything to pave the way for a forthcoming announcement? He thought that there could at least be no harm in remarking:

"Harold came down to us last night."

"Yes, I know," she replied; "I have just been talking to him."

Dick pursed up his lips. "Oh, have you?" he exclaimed, in visible dismay; "I—I'm rather sorry for that."

"Why are you sorry?" the girl inquired.

It was as difficult to answer that very natural question as to leave it unanswered. Dick reflected for a moment, and then told himself that, upon the whole, he had better speak out at once. Nothing, he was sure, would prevent Lady Gardiner from doing so, and perhaps, after all, nothing irremediable had yet taken place. Lilian, somehow, did not look as lovers fresh from an exchange of glad avowals are wont to look. So he said:

"I wonder whether you would mind coming round

to the sunk garden with me for a few minutes before you go into the house. If we are about to have a discussion—which isn't unlikely—we might as well be sheltered from the wind while we argue, don't you think so?"

"I don't know what there can be for us to argue about," answered Lilian, who, nevertheless, guessed, and who would gladly have made her escape.

"You'll know presently. Come along and let us get it over. I may tell you that I am only anticipating Lady Gardiner, and perhaps you would rather hear what you must hear from such a very old friend as I am than from her."

In days past the rector had exercised a certain sacerdotal influence over Lilian, and his present tone of voice was reminiscent—not unpleasantly so—of a period of her life during which she had rendered willing obedience to his behests. It may have been on that account that she followed him, without further demur, to the sunk garden on the south front of the building, which was just then flooded with sunshine and brilliant with masses of hyacinths, tulips and jonquils.

"Now," he began resolutely, "I expect I shall make you angry; but that can't be helped. I am old enough to remember your birth; so you will forgive me, I hope, for using one of the few privileges which go with advancing years and alluding to what I suppose must be called a delicate subject. I want you, in short, to admit, strictly between ourselves, that you and my brother Harold were very nearly becoming an engaged couple some months ago."

He was looking away from her (for the sufficient reason that he could not quite trust himself to look at her) as he spoke, and therefore did not see the glance of hurt and humiliated reproach which she was unable to repress. But she did not choose to dispute his assertion.

"Well?" was all that she said.

"Well, then came trouble. I am not standing up for Harold, mind you; I think he behaved badly, and I won't attempt to explain his having behaved as he did. I must leave him to give explanations, if he can. But I wish in justice to him, and for your sake as well as his, to say that I honestly believe he has loved you in his heart through all that has come and gone. I have watched him, and I have noticed how his face changes whenever your name is mentioned. May I be very bold and add that I have watched you too—and have seen what I expected to see?"

No reply being vouchsafed, he proceeded: "Of one thing I am certain; he has never loved Miss Gardiner. Will you take my word for that?"

Lilian had a momentary difficulty in controlling her voice, but she managed to answer, "I dare say you are right."

"I know I am! So this brings us to the question of whether he ought to be held unpardonable for being the oddly constructed, composite mortal that he is. One can't look for perfection here below, you know, we all have our weaknesses and defects and so forth, and his, I think, lie a good deal on the surface. Marriage must always be a give-and-take business; only

what is essential, it seems to me, is that there should be love on both sides. Given that, all things are possible and most things are pardonable."

"Including, I suppose, such a trifling whimsicality as his having offered himself to Josephine only a few days ago."

"Oh, he has told you, then? Well, that was honest of him, anyhow."

"I am not sure that he would have told me if he hadn't foreseen that I should be told by Lady Gardiner. But it really doesn't matter whether he would or not; for nothing that either he or you could say would ever bring about the marriage for which you seem to be so anxious."

"I am not anxious for it!" Dick declared, still persistently gazing at the sky-line and the tossing tree-tops in the park which broke it; "personally, I am anything but anxious for it; I don't mind confessing that much. Only I want to do my duty."

"It seems rather odd," observed Lilian loftily, "that you should consider it your duty to say things which, as you must know, are particularly offensive to me."

At length Dick withdrew his eyes from distant objects and turned them upon the speaker's somewhat flushed countenance. He perceived, on doing so, that he had justified his prediction and that she was very angry indeed; but he did not beg her pardon.

"It may be anybody's duty sometimes to be offensive," said he, "nobody knows that better than a parson. You mustn't, if I can help it, spoil your

future and Harold's future for want of a little plain speaking."

"Well," she returned, "now that you have done what you call your duty by speaking with such extreme plainness, I hope you will be satisfied and drop the subject. It was my duty to speak rather plainly to your brother just now, and I hope *he* will drop the subject. I suppose I have only myself to thank for your having both so misunderstood me; I suppose I must have behaved in an even more silly way last summer than I thought I had. But it is some comfort to know that you can't, either of you, misunderstand me any more."

Dick could. "Ah," he sighed, "it is just as I told Anne! If you didn't care for him you would be less indignant with him."

"Did you tell Anne that?" asked Lilian, with a painful, humbling conjecture at what had probably been said to elicit the above false diagnosis. "I wish Anne would mind her own—no, I won't say that, for I am sure she means to be kind; but——"

"But you wish, perhaps, that I would mind my own business?"

He was not contradicted, and, after a few seconds of silence, Lilian said: "No doubt you also mean to be kind, though hardly to me, I should imagine. I may tell you, and you may tell Anne, that I am not a bit indignant with your brother about anything, except about his having filched your play, and, after all, if you don't object to that, why should I? Very likely you think that it would be a good thing for him to

marry and settle down, and that you ought to give him a helping hand. So, as you know that he honors me with a sort of conditional preference, you take up the cudgels for him, lest I should be prejudiced against him by Lady Gardiner."

Dick shook his head. "Nothing of the kind!" he declared. "I am fond of Harold, and I would gladly do him a good turn, if I had it in my power; but I can't pretend that this officious interference on my part has been due so much to a wish for his happiness as for yours."

"Thank you very much," returned Lilian with ominous composure: "I fully appreciate that."

He went on, without heeding her, "And what I said a minute or two ago is quite true; I don't personally wish that you and he should become man and wife."

"Then why, I wonder, should you have considered it necessary to say the—the—I must call them the almost insulting things that you have been saying to me?"

"He put his hands together, in deprecation of her wrath, and laughed unmirthfully. "Shall I tell you why?" he asked. "You will think me a most ridiculous old fool; but I don't know that that isn't a shade better than being set down as a false friend, which is what you at present appear to think me. I was commissioned by Lady Gardiner to speak to you; she thought it behooved me to save you, as she put it, from 'falling a victim to Harold's plausibility.' But, like Balaam, I had to bless when I was sent out to curse,

because—oh, let me blurt the absurd fact out and have done with it!—because I love you myself, Lilian. There!—now you know. I have loved you, I believe, ever since you were a child, and I can't help it, and it isn't, when all's said, a thing to be ashamed of. I don't mind your laughing at me; only I can't bear you to be displeased with me. Whether you love Harold or not I can't tell; I'll say no more about that. But, as I couldn't be impartial in the matter, you see, it wasn't for me to put obstacles in his way, was it?"

Well, at all events, she did not laugh at him, which was so far satisfactory. But he really had not expected her to cry, and when it became manifest to him that her silence was caused by sheer inability to articulate, he was a good deal alarmed.

"My dear Lilian," he exclaimed, "my dear girl, I haven't disgusted you, have I? Surely what I have confessed need not make any difference between us. I thought it might be as well to let you know the truth; but you may rely upon me never to make any allusion, direct or indirect, to it again, and——"

He was arrested by her raising her eyes, which were swimming in tears, to his and by the tremulous smile upon her lips which on a sudden rendered language superflous. Modest though he was, and convinced that the cause which he had not even pleaded was a lost one, it was impossible for him to misinterpret that unspoken avowal.

Presently Lady Gardiner, looking out of the window, upon the chance of descrying one or the other of two persons who had kept her waiting an unconscion-

ably long time, beheld a spectacle which drew from her something between a chuckle and a snort.

"Upon my word!" she ejaculated. "Right in front of the house, too, and in full view, for anything that they knew or care, of half a dozen giggling servants! Why, it's hardly decent! Comforting to witness, though, and far and away the best thing that could have happened for them both. I wonder whether they will have the manners to return thanks to me. Also I wonder what he has done to that hand of his, which is sprawling across the middle of the girl's back. Can he have been knocking his rascally brother down? No; I am afraid that would be too good to be true. A small token of gratitude from poor dear Lord Chancellor, more likely. Well, it serves the man right for being so clumsy. Ah! there they go at last, with their arms round one another's waists, like a couple of shop-assistants. For sublime disregard of all received canons of propriety commend me to the clergy! May as well have a quiet nap now, I suppose; there doesn't seem to be much fear of my being disturbed for the next hour or more."

CHAPTER XXIII

DEFINITELY PLACED

HAROLD, as he sauntered across the fields in the direction of the rectory, after his unequivocal dismissal by Lilian, laughed softly once or twice; for indeed he did not regard himself as having been unequivocally dismissed.

"Not stupid," he murmured, echoing her last words; "no, I don't think I am exactly stupid, although I seem, somehow or other, to be always doing rather stupid things. It was stupid to drive her into a corner like that and remind her that she did love me some months ago; but it was wise—indispensable even—to acknowledge that I had made Miss Josephine an offer. Of course she wasn't pleased—how could she be?—but I shouldn't wonder if she understood, all the same. For, after all, she isn't stupid either."

His own stupidity and lack of comprehension were not without excuse. For so many years he had been falling a little in love with women who for the most part had fallen a good deal in love with him; his whole experience (save in the solitary instance of Josephine Gardiner) had so uniformly led him to assume that the last word would always be his that he could not believe in a phenomenon so strange as Lilian's having

ceased to care for him. He was not conceited; he knew very well that he was not worth much, and upon his good looks, of which he was necessarily aware, he set no higher value than it is human and natural to ascribe to a birthright beyond dispute; yet rejection, now that he himself was at last thoroughly in earnest, was to him a thing barely conceivable. He forgot, perhaps, that he had been in earnest when he had offered to throw up his profession at Miss Gardiner's bidding; he forgot, or did not realize, that he was forever being in earnest and that his earnestness was never of long duration. What had happened to him, he thought, was merely that he had met with a check which might well have been foreseen; he would run down again in a few weeks' time and atone for his present somewhat over-confident precipitation.

Anne had gone out when he returned to the rectory; so he spent a quiet, solitary afternoon, smoking many cigarettes and enjoying complete idleness as only those can whose waking hours are ordinarily full of occupation to the brim. Not until five o'clock, by which time he was beginning to wonder languidly what had become of everybody, did Dick come hurrying in, with apologies almost too profuse and contrite for the occasion.

"My dear fellow, I am more ashamed of myself than I can say! What a way to reward you for sparing us one day out of your busy life! But first of all, as I dare say Anne will have told you, Lady Gardiner unexpectedly turned up in church and insisted upon carrying me off to lunch with her, and then—then

other things occurred. In short, it has been a—a most unusual day. If anybody had told me when I got up this morning what it was going to bring, I should have set him down as a raving lunatic—I should indeed!"

Harold surveyed his elder brother with amused curiosity and—oddly enough—without any suspicion of the truth, although he at once perceived that Dick and Lilian must have met.

"Why, what have you been up to?" he asked. "You look as if you weren't sure whether you were standing on your head or your heels."

"Then," answered Dick, laughing in a sheepish, deprecating fashion, "all I can say is that my looks don't belie me."

His looks might surely have betrayed him, since his gray eyes had a peculiar light in them which has but one meaning and which is visible in the eyes of mortal man on certain occasions only. But there was more in his eyes and in his heart than the joy and triumph of victory; for he had before him the unpleasant task of announcing his victory to a discomfited rival, and how to accomplish this with any sort of delicacy or consideration he knew not. Perhaps he was well advised in abandoning circumlocution and saying straight out:

"You won't wonder at my strange appearance when I tell you of my extraordinary good fortune. Lilian Ormond and I are engaged to be married!"

Nobody could have been less on his guard than Harold against such a knock-down blow as this; yet he took it without wincing.

"That," he remarked composedly, "is indeed a

piece of good fortune. I hope you won't think me rude for agreeing with you that it is rather an extraordinary one. Unexpected, at all events, by me; though I congratulate you none the less sincerely on that account."

His first and not unnatural impression was that Lilian had done this thing, as women sometimes will, out of sheer perversity and for the pleasure of cutting off her nose to spite her face. He believed that she loved him; he did not believe that she loved poor old Dick, whose elation he found both pathetic and ludicrous, nor did he believe that the engagement so abruptly entered into would ever lead to a marriage. But he was compelled to modify that consoling view of the case when his brother, drawing nearer to him and laying a hand on his shoulder, said:

"Harold, old chap, we must have it out together; otherwise I sha'n't feel comfortable, nor, I should think, will you. Of course I know that you have cared for Lilian, and I must assume that you care still, since she tells me that you asked her to marry you this morning. She herself is persuaded that you don't; but——"

"Oh, I care," interpolated Harold, smiling.

Dick sighed. "Yes, it stands to reason that you do, and I am more sorry about it than I can tell you. But what I want you to know—whether you will think that it makes things better or worse I can't tell, but it makes them decisive, anyhow—what I want you to know is that, even if I had been dead or otherwise disposed of, you would have had no chance with her.

She assures me of that, and in all my experience of her I have never found her anything but strictly truthful. She doesn't deny that you had a chance at one time; only you didn't take it. And in the nature of things, so she says, it couldn't possibly recur; because——"

"Because of Miss Gardiner or because of my having brought out your play as my own?"

"Not for either of those reasons; although she owns that they helped her to discover what she might not have discovered without help. It was a queer freak of destiny," concluded Dick, with an embarrassed laugh, "that made you and me competitors, and a queerer one still that has made me the winner; but—there's the fact! I have her own word for it, and she wouldn't say what was untrue. I only wish I could think, as she does, that—that——"

"What does she think, I wonder? That I shall be very easily consoled? Well," said Harold, getting up and stretching himself, "she is quite right. I am always easily consoled; I don't know anybody who is more blessed in that respect than I am, and I heartily wish you and her joy. You are excellent people both of you; so you ought to step well together; whereas it doesn't seem altogether unlikely that I, who am not excellent, might have got out of step before long. Let it be agreed that what is is right, and let us shake hands all round."

This method of carrying matters off, which Dick thought so generous that it moved him almost to tears, came without much difficulty to Harold, whose instincts led him to play an awkward part with such grace as

circumstances would allow; but he was nevertheless profoundly hurt and mortified. It had been mortifying to be refused even by Josephine Gardiner, whom he had half wished to refuse him; it was ten times more so to be convinced, as he now was, that he had lost—if indeed he had ever in reality won—Lilian's love. After all, then, he was not irresistible! There were women, it appeared, who could do very well without him; and on a sudden it flashed across him, as a sort of whimsical revelation, how very ill able he was to do without them. They had bored him, they had irritated him, they had amused him; but they had always more or less understood him and had always spoiled him. And so, somehow or other, they had managed to render themselves indispensable. He could not, for instance, in his present sore plight go to Shepherd or to any other male friend and ask for that sort of sympathy which no male mortal has it in his power to bestow. It was the feminine element in the abstract that his tastes and nature craved, not any one woman in particular.

His sister Anne proved a somewhat inadequate representative of feminine perceptivity that evening, although she was as kind and compassionate as she knew how to be. Anne, to whom Dick's great news was a source of unmixed satisfaction, could hardly be expected to weep over the dislocation of her younger brother's nose; yet she had some amicable and would-be consolatory words for Harold, which the rector's enforced absence at evensong enabled her to address to him.

"Cheer up!" said she; "things might have been ever so much worse. You might have been—upon my word, I half wonder that you aren't!—betrothed to Josephine Gardiner. Just think of that! And do you know, Harold, if you were engaged to Lil Ormond I should be almost as sorry for you as I should be for her. She is a dear, good girl, and she will make an admirable wife for Dick; but she would never have done for you. Not nearly broad-minded enough to tolerate your little ways of going on. Added to which, you would have wearied of her in six months."

"Should I?"

"Well, in a year, then. I don't say that you won't regret her for more than a year; that, of course, is quite another affair. But regrets won't do you any harm, and success in this rather half-hearted courtship of yours wouldn't, you may take my word for it, have done you any good."

"I take your word for no such thing," answered Harold; "you can't know much about it if you think that I have been half-hearted."

"I know enough about it and you and her," retorted Anne, "to know that you are both of you well out of it. All the same, I believe you are fond of her in your way, and I see that you are feeling pretty dejected just now, and I give you all the credit you deserve for putting a good face upon things before Dick. You mustn't quarrel with me if I rejoice with him more than I can condole with you; for Dick, you see, is always desperately in earnest about everything,

whereas you, if you'll pardon my saying so, are never quite in earnest about anything."

That appreciation might be a correct one, but it fell rather short of being soothing, and Harold wanted very badly to be soothed. No doubt that was why he despatched a telegram to Lorna Fitzwalter before leaving for London the next morning and followed this up by a visit to her early in the afternoon. He found her, as it chanced, looking her best; for the excitement and curiosity engendered by his heralded arrival had brought some tinge of pink into her usually sallow cheeks, and it may be also that she had taken pains to render herself attractive. She had, at any rate, arrayed herself in a very becoming fawn-colored costume of some soft material, and her little drawing-room was gay with the flowers of spring, while the appearance of its mistress in the subdued light contrived by lowered blinds was less suggestive of autumn than was sometimes the case. There was no denying, Harold thought, that Lorna was still an extremely handsome woman.

She was also an extremely kind-hearted and forgiving one. He could not but acknowledge that, with a pang of compunction, when she received unflinchingly and unfrowningly his somewhat brutal reply to her natural, irrepressible query.

"I've come," was his announcement, "because you seem to be the only woman who will have anything to say to me, and because I can't stand being left altogether out in the cold. What do you think of my having made two formal bids for matrimony during the

last week, with the result that I have been twice declined?"

"I think," she declared, "that there are two women in the world who don't deserve to get what they have lost and who wouldn't have been worth winning if they had been won. You needn't tell me who they are, because of course I know, and I think I know why you proposed to them too. In different ways they both invited you to do it, and you wouldn't have been yourself if you had neglected to take up an invitation of that sort. All the same, I don't believe you are really disappointed. In spite of her money, you never can have wanted to marry Miss Gardiner, who never meant to marry you, and as for Miss Ormond——"

"What about Miss Ormond?" Harold asked, when she came to a pause.

"To give her her due, Miss Ormond is pretty. So are hundreds and thousands of other girls. You know her better than I do, but she gave me the impression of being quite ignorant of the world and its ways, and I should say that, as a wife, she would be exacting, obstinate and difficult to live with."

Harold nodded. "That may be so," he agreed.

"You know it is so, and you are not as inconsolable as you wish to appear. You have been inconsolable several times before, haven't you, Harold?"

"Have I? Well, perhaps. And I always come to you to be consoled."

"I hope you always will," she returned, smiling, "and I hope you will never come in vain."

"Ah, you have such unexhaustible patience!"

"I am bound to be patient," said Lorna, with a touch of pathos; "I should have seen the last of you long ago if I hadn't been. It is something, after all, that you do come to me when other people fail you. It shows—I wonder what it shows!"

"Oh, it shows more things than one, I expect," answered Harold, with a laugh. "I am most awfully fond of that girl, you know," he added somewhat irrelevantly. "And she is going to marry my brother, of all men in the world!"

"Does that really surprise you, after the little scene that she made at your supper-party? Sometimes you strike me as wonderfully simple, Harold; although I must confess that there are times when I could wish you less complicated. Still, as you say, you do end by coming back to me."

"And by being welcomed, Heaven forgive me! It's too absurd!"

"What is absurd?" asked Miss Fitzwalter a little anxiously; for indeed the poor woman could not but be aware of her own absurdity. But his answer reassured her.

"My infidelity, my ingratitude, my shilly-shallying —my whole life and conduct, in short! Why don't you take permanent possession of me, Lorna, and put an end to it all?"

And, as she stared at him with dilated eyes of interrogation and incredulity, he went on: "Oh, I mean it; I realize that Destiny or Providence, or whatever the force may be that doesn't make mistakes, has always meant it. I don't even apologize for having

strayed away so often; Destiny or Providence, which made me what I am, must be saddled with the responsibility for that also. If you'll take me as I am, Lorna —and nobody knows better than you what I am, for even when I don't tell you my secrets you guess them —if you'll take me as I am, I'll try to behave decently. You'll be jealous at times," Harold continued pensively; "one foresees that; yet the odds are that you won't have as much cause for jealousy as most wives. I'm no longer as young as I was, you see, and I feel more and more every day that I am happier on the stage than in the world. When once we are married, I shall develop into a very domestic sort of person off the stage, I fancy."

That he should thus coolly take her assent as a foregone conclusion did not offend Lorna, nor did she appear to object to an offer which came almost in the same breath with an avowal that he was "most awfully fond" of somebody else. To tell the truth about her, she had been fed upon chance scraps for so long that a whole bone, even if somewhat unceremoniously bestowed, was a gift which well-nigh overwhelmed her with joy and gratitude.

"If only I could be sure that you wouldn't repent!" she murmured.

The one thing of which any woman rash enough to couple her future with Harold's might feel quite sure was that he would repent of the arrangement; but although, in a general way of speaking, he was well aware of this, his heart did not in the present crucial juncture misgive him. He was touched by Lorna's

humility, he remembered her long forbearance and her repeated acts of generosity; it seemed to him that she had fairly earned the reward that she coveted, small though its intrinsic value might be. Moreover, she was, as has been mentioned, looking handsome that afternoon, and he had been all but enamored of her once upon a time, and she remained, when all was said, the only woman who could be relied upon to stick to him through thick and thin. So he laughed and held out both his hands to her saying:

"Don't be afraid with any amazement, Lorna; I'm going to be good for the future. And even if I were going to be bad, your forgiveness, upon which I should count in advance, would always preserve me from the risk of repentance."

"There's something in that," she agreed, echoing his laugh, though the tears rose to her eyes at the same moment. "And indeed I'm old enough," she added, with an apparent inconsequence which did not obscure the very natural thought that was in her mind.

The betrothal of Mr. Dunville to the leading lady of his company was made known at the theater, that same evening, immediately after the performance of Renunciation and hearty were the felicitations addressed to the affianced pair by their fellow artists. Actors and actresses are of all mortals the most unsophisticated. Turning night into day, as their avocations compel them to do, and, as a natural consequence, seeing wonderfully little of the outer world when off duty, they are, as a rule, quite willing to take it for granted that people who marry do so for the simplest

of reasons. That Miss Fitzwalter was by a good many years Harold Dunville's senior those who had long been associated with them both in a professional capacity could not but be aware; but that he was contemplating a misalliance was an aspect of the case which did not suggest itself to them. Only Shepherd, whose horizon was a somewhat wider one, had some ado to mask the consternation that he felt.

"But, my dear Dunville—why?" he asked in a dismayed whisper, as soon as he was able to draw his patron aside.

"It would take hours to tell you," answered Harold, smiling. "That is, unless you'll accept an explanation which can be given in a few words. Because it's final; because it definitely places me. Will that do for you? It ought to do, considering that you are never tired of impressing upon me that my mission in life is to be a comedian—neither more nor less."

"Your mission in public life, yes; but not in private life," Shepherd objected. "You have never been at home with the class into which you—so needlessly, it seems to me—propose to marry."

"Haven't I? You disappoint me, Shepherd. I thought I had been a good enough comedian to give them a different impression. I haven't, I am afraid, been quite good enough to convey the impression I should have liked to convey in other quarters; but that's all over and done with now, and the inhabitants of those quarters have my full permission to imitate me by disposing of themselves as they may think fit."

He was not insincere in so saying; yet it must be

confessed that his equanimity was a trifle disturbed when he read in the columns of the Morning Post, the next day, that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place between Captain Desborough, the recently elected member of the House of Commons who had forsaken the Navy for politics, and Josephine, only daughter and heiress of Sir Joseph Gardiner M. P., of Grosvenor Place and Dunville Manor, Kent.

CHAPTER XXIV

A BRILLIANT EXIT

HAROLD said to himself that he didn't care—and that, of course, is what no mortal ever says to himself unless he does care. Upon a further analysis of his feelings, which would have been superfluous had he been genuinely indifferent, he went so far as to acknowledge that he deplored the substitution of a coming line of Desboroughs for the ancient family which had given its name to Dunville Manor, although the oddity of Miss Gardiner's choice was no affair of his. There were perhaps other things which, as the days passed on, he inevitably deplored; but this he really could not afford to acknowledge. The die was cast; with his eyes open he had accepted what he had accepted, and if the affectionate, devoted, unselfish Lorna was not quite a lady—well, he had never at any time imagined that she was. What nonsense, after all, it is to doubt the self-evident fact that all human beings are made of the same clay, and how silly to be vexed by trifling solecisms on the part of those whose forefathers do not happen to have been for a certain number of generations well fed, well clothed and well educated! For the matter of that, did anybody know who Sir Joseph Gardiner's grandfather had been?

That Sir Joseph Gardiner's daughter could boast

of good blood on the maternal side was a circumstance more perceptible in her physical aspect than in her manners, which were never urbane or distinguished for delicacy. Harold, chancing upon her one afternoon in Bond Street, as she was crossing the pavement from a shop-door to her carriage, thought it rather ill-bred of her to tap him upon the shoulder with her sunshade, burst out laughing, and say:

"So you have actually taken my advice, I hear! I congratulate myself and you."

"Thank you very much," he answered, "I am delighted to have this opportunity of returning the compliment and congratulating you. Not upon having settled my insignificant future—for I can't say that your advice has had much to do with that—but upon having determined your own. I am sure it will be a bright and conspicuous one. Do you become a Conservative now, may I ask, or does Desborough become a Radical?"

She laughed again. "Oh, I suppose I gravitate to his side. He couldn't come over to ours without vacating his seat, which would be out of the question. Besides, as I have often told you, it doesn't matter two straws nowadays; government by party is as dead as Queen Anne. Yes, I think we shall very likely be bright and conspicuous, as you say; I seem to see the elements of fame and distinction in a partnership of our sort. You and Miss Fitzwalter are, of course, already famous—in your way."

"In a way which you are pleased to despise, but which suits us very fairly well."

"It suits you both to perfection, and I think you will also find that you suit one another, your tastes being, after all, so similar. The atmosphere of the stage is a rather restricted atmosphere, to be sure; but one recognizes that it is as the breath of your nostrils to you, and naturally it must be so to her. You ought to get on all right when once you have grown accustomed to the other restrictions which matrimony more or less entails."

She had her foot on the step of the carriage. "Can I put you down anywhere?" she asked.

Harold declined the offer, took off his hat and walked on, feeling, it may be, that he had been sufficiently put down as it was. Miss Gardiner's air of patronage, her good-humored impertinence, her significant omission to invite future visits on his part, all these were so many signs that he had lost caste, that a married actor is by no means the same person as a bachelor actor of good birth, and that he must no longer expect to mix as freely as of yore in circles where his wife was unlikely to be welcomed. Such, at least, was the interpretation which he—erroneously, perhaps—placed upon a reception which he chose to regard as typical. Once more, therefore, he was fain to protest inwardly that he didn't care. Had he ever in his life cared for smart society? Had the ostracism to which he had been condemned for a time in days gone by ever distressed him? The truth was that it had distressed him a good deal more than he knew, and that poor Lorna, by daily tricks of speech and demeanor of which she was wholly unconscious, dis-

tressed him now after a fashion unprecedented in their long previous intimacy. Oh, yes, he repeated!—how could it be otherwise?

Nevertheless, he retained certain inherited instincts or principles, the mention of which may possibly serve to rehabilitate him a little in the esteem of impatient readers. Lorna was what she unavoidably was, and he ought to have remembered that when, in a moment of petulance, he had thrown himself into her arms; but since he had not remembered it, and since his word was pledged, the least that he could do now was to stick to her and stick up for her, should occasion arise. Occasions were not unlikely to arise, and indeed he had to wait no longer than another twenty-four hours for one of them to present itself in the shape of an unannounced visit from his sister Anne. Anne, who arrived in Ashley Gardens the next afternoon, with a concerned countenance, lost no time in stating the nature of her errand.

"My poor, dear Harold," she began, "this will never do! I suppose you may have thought it was dramatic, and so perhaps it is; but that doesn't make it practical or practicable, you know. If you have let yourself in for a breach of promise case I'm sorry; still no price is too high to pay for liberty, and I should think you ought to be in funds just now. Anyhow, I have a balance at the bank, and you may count upon me to pull you through. In fact, if you'll leave it to me, I'll undertake to say matters shall be squared without ever coming into court. What is altogether inadmissible is that you should marry this woman and be dragged down to her level."

Harold was a little touched and a good deal amused. "The utter disdain of your sex for right and honor and justice in the abstract," he remarked, "is equaled only by your magnificent effrontery. I suppose that what you have it in your head to do is to descend upon my poor betrothed and, after pointing out in forcible language that she will be the shabbiest and most selfish of human beings if she doesn't let me off, to suggest that she should name her terms."

The corners of Anne's mouth went down. "Well," said she, half in assent, half in interrogation.

"Well, it's magnificent of you, and, between ourselves, I shouldn't be in the least surprised at your gaining your object without the expenditure of a penny. The only thing against your success is that I don't want to be let off."

"Oh, don't tell me that! You needn't tell me what made you behave in such a suicidal way either, because of course I know. You may imagine how distressed Dick is about it, and I am sure you can't imagine how little Lilian is distressed. I am extremely fond of Lilian, but she is, after all, a woman and in love. Don't you see that that makes her invulnerable and that you might marry your cook without causing her even a momentary pang?"

"Heaven forbid that I should cause any pangs either to her or to Lorna Fitzwalter, who happens also to be a woman and in love. At least, she assures me that she is in love and I have every reason to believe her."

Anne grunted. "That may be; but unless she is a born idiot she can't fancy that you are in love with her. Come, Harold, the mischief isn't done yet, and

really it mustn't be done! Consider what such a marriage would mean for you."

"I've considered, thanks. It will mean that I shall be cut, or at all events quietly dropped, by the majority of my friends. Even, I dare say, by you——"

"Oh, not by us," Anne interjected; "if the worst comes to the worst—but I hope and trust it won't—we shall have to put up with the woman. All the same, you will sink; for it isn't as though she were a great actress or as though you were a great man socially. You will simply become a couple whom people don't particularly care to know, that's all; and if entreaties or bribes can preserve you from that dreary lot, it isn't I who shall spare them."

"How unscrupulous you are! And you a sort of parson in petticoats too!"

"I am your sister," Anne returned, resolutely. "Maybe, if it comes to that, I am my mother's daughter into the bargain. Anyhow, I'm no believer in misalliances. Now, Harold, be a good fellow—in many respects you *are* a good fellow; I know it if nobody else does—and just honestly tell Miss Fitzwalter the whole truth. Or, if you won't do that, let me tell her."

"My dear Anne," said Harold, smiling, "she knows the whole truth. She has always, strange as it may appear to you, known the whole truth about me, and she has always been true to me through it all, and that is one reason why I can't possibly be false to her now. She was my friend at a time when I hadn't any other friends and when my own kith and kin didn't hold out a finger to rescue me from sinking to far

deeper depths than those which you contemplate with such alarm and aversion to-day. In three words, she loves me—and in three more words, I am grateful. That, if you will believe me, sums up and disposes of the whole situation."

It was well said, and he was an adept in the management of his voice; but Anne Dunville's shrewdness and common sense were proof against appeals to her emotions. She looked him full in the face, with that queer, wry smile of hers and with some admiration and affection, as well as a good deal of incredulity.

"Stuff and nonsense!" she rapped out.

"No," he returned tolerantly, "it isn't stuff and nonsense this time; and I am not acting a part, as you think I am. But the logic of facts must convince you; I haven't anything more to say."

Anne, who had more to say, said it in vain. She went away at length, baffled, puzzled, with tears in her eyes, persuaded against her will that Harold must be sincere and that, for once, he was not acting a part. It may be conjectured that he was always, consciously or unconsciously, acting a part; yet his self-approval on this occasion was grounded upon something rather more substantial than the satisfaction which he naturally felt at having with so noble an air waved intervention aside. For he meant to marry Lorna Fitzwalter and he meant to make her as happy as might be, plainly though he perceived that his own happiness, not to speak of his daily comfort, must go overboard in the process.

"Weighing one thing against another," said he to

himself, smiling ruefully, "I should prefer death; but, as one doesn't die at my age and with a constitution like mine, life of a sort—oh, how well one knows what sort of a life it will be!—must be accepted. Well, there remains the stage."

Almost he was inclined to think that the stage might suffice and that whatever of joy and reality there was to be in his future existence must be found in the presentment of assumed characters. If he did not go quite the length of discovering that the joys and realities of his past had all been connected with the assumption of characters which were not his, it must be admitted that such feats of insight and analysis are not common. Has any man ever found out that he has no real character of his own at all? Yet there are many such men.

Everybody who was present at the last performance which the St. Martin's Theater was destined to provide for a discriminating public declared afterward that Mr. Dunville had fairly eclipsed himself that evening. Shepherd, a capable and experienced judge, is of the above opinion, and adds, with a touch of the superstition which seems to be inherent in all persons connected with the drama, that from the first he felt sure something was going to happen. People don't act like that unless something is going to happen to them, he asserts. What happened, up to the interval between the second and the third acts, was merely that a play which had already enthralled a long succession of audiences evoked even more than usual enthusiasm, and that the engagement—just given out—of the talented

author, actor, and manager to the most distinguished of his subordinates was made the theme of considerable comment and discussion, but when that interval had been protracted for about five minutes beyond its appointed bounds, Harold stepped quietly before the curtain and said:

"May I ask you to be so kind as to disperse, without hurrying? There is no occasion for hurry, nor is there at present the slightest danger; but I am sorry to say that a fire has broken out in a corner of the building, which we have as yet been unable to extinguish, and there is a possibility of the flames spreading. We think it better, therefore, that everybody should leave while there is still plenty of time to do so. I am sure I need not caution you against panic, for which there is no justification whatever."

Panics are, of course, never justifiable; still, if Harold's hearers had known a little more of the true state of affairs than he deemed it wise to tell them, they might reasonably enough have been alarmed. As it was, they took him at his word, behaving, upon the whole, so well that the staircases and lobby were vacated expeditiously and with no worse mishaps than a few torn skirts and bruised elbows. But when the released spectators emerged upon the street, where a large crowd had gathered, they drew in their breath and thanked their stars that they were safe. For the sky was red with what had already assumed the proportions of a conflagration, tongues of flame were darting through the windows and above the roof at the back of the theater, and the clamorous arrival of the

fire brigade, prompt though it was, seemed as if it might prove too late to preserve the whole structure from being gutted. Somebody's carelessly discarded cigarette—Mr. Dunville's own cigarette, a few irresponsible babblers averred—had set light to a mass of highly inflammable material, and nothing could now save the insurance companies from a heavy loss. Happily, there could be no loss of life, inasmuch as all those employed behind the scenes were reported to have made their escape as speedily as the audience had done, though under somewhat more difficult conditions.

Harold himself, like the skipper of the sinking ship, was the last to leave the building. He crept out by the stage door on all fours—half choked, even so, by the dense volumes of smoke beneath which he had to make his way—and the crowd greeted him with a cheer. Standing on the wet pavement and watching the steady streams of water which were brought to bear, with no apparent result, upon the blaze, he remarked coolly to Shepherd, whom he found at his elbow:

"We make a brilliant exit, don't we? What a pity we couldn't have deferred it until the piece began to show some signs of flagging! This will cost us several thousands, I presume, even though we are insured."

Shepherd shook his head. "Oh, yes; we are out of it for this season, I'm afraid; we must try to recoup ourselves in the provinces, that's all. We have all saved our skins, though, which at one moment didn't look like an absolute certainty."

"Yes, thanks to your splendid courage and presence of mind!" cried Lorna Fitzwalter, suddenly

thrusting herself through the throng and flinging her arms round Harold. "Oh, what a fright you gave me!"

He gently disengaged himself, laughing and a little embarrassed. "Please remember," said he, "that we have stationed ourselves in a glare which renders us conspicuous to all beholders and that, as there isn't anything to cry about, we run some risk of being laughed at."

"I don't care who sees me!" Lorna proudly declared; "everybody must know that what you have just done was no laughing matter."

What he had done had been to clear the theater composedly and systematically of a number of stupefied supernumeraries and shrieking, hysterical women. He had certainly given evidence of coolness and capacity in dealing with an emergency which might easily have developed into a catastrophe, and he was not, to tell the truth, ill pleased with himself. However, he made light of his achievement, such as it was.

"Oh, I had any amount of time," said he; "all I had to do was to prevent them from getting clubbed in the doorway and to satisfy myself that no stragglers had been left behind. I should have walked out ten minutes ago, instead of crawling out, if I hadn't chosen to make assurance doubly sure by a last tour of inspection. Well, there isn't a soul in the place now, and our season is hopelessly compromised; so we may as well enjoy the spectacle, which is really rather a fine one of its kind."

But even while he spoke there arose from the packed

mass of human beings around him a long-drawn, murmuring groan which caused him to start and turn his eyes toward the burning pile, from which he had momentarily averted them. On the summit, black against the red glow, was the wildly gesticulating figure of a woman—some foolish, belated dresser, probably, who had been forgotten or temporarily overpowered by the smoke, and who, finding descent impossible, had fled upward to a point from which there could be little or no chance of rescuing her. For the longest fire-escape at hand was not long enough to reach the roof, and the roof itself might collapse at any moment. Harold sprang forward at once, shaking off Lorna, who divined his crazy purpose and clutched him, shaking off Shepherd also, who followed suit with vehement protests. On the threshold of the stage-door a stalwart fireman placed both hands against his chest and sent him reeling back. "No use, sir! you can't do no good that way!"

But he ducked under the man's arm and, dropping on his hands and knees, as before, vanished through the stage-entrance before he could be stopped. What insane impulse led him to hurl himself into that death-trap? Or was he, perhaps, not in the least insane, but, on the contrary, keenly, abnormally appreciative of a Heaven-sent opportunity? Did he on a sudden realize that, although he could never reach or save the unfortunate woman on the roof above him, a way lay open for saving himself gloriously from the most inglorious and tedious of futures, and that death by suffocation is, after all, no such bad death, as deaths go?

To these questions, which subsequently suggested themselves to several persons who had loved Harold Dunville and were to see him no more in this world, answers are wanting. He was pursued by some brave fellows who risked their own lives to preserve his; but pursuit for more than a yard or two was out of the question, and indeed his disappearance was followed almost immediately by the fall of the roof, which removed his fate finally from the purview of doubt or hope. First and last, in public and in private life, he had caused innumerable eyes to shed tears; *flebilis occidit;* there still remain many women, and even a few men, who can not speak of him without a display of emotion which is considered unbecoming in this country.

What pæans were sung in the newspapers of the following day, what beautiful and eulogistic language was employed without stint by writers of leading articles, may readily be imagined. Imaginable, too, is the vociferous despair of poor Lorna Fitzwalter, and Shepherd's mute self-reproach, and the grief of Dick and Anne Dunville, permanently inconsolable for the loss of one who, had he lived, would probably have given them more anxiety than happiness. But it was reserved for Josephine Gardiner to sum the dead man up in a single sentence which must be accepted by his friends as apposite, if not entirely adequate.

"He was in many ways a charming, attractive sort of being," she remarked pensively to Captain Desborough, who had just spoken of him in the warmest and most generous terms. "A genius he certainly was not,

and a satisfactory success he never could have become in any walk of life. I don't think he had it in him to care to the extent which is really indispensable about anything or anybody; not even about himself, as that gratuitous plunge of his into a fiery furnace seems to prove. But let us do him justice; he was a great comedian—a great comedian up to the very last!"

THE END